

SPORT

Mar.
1979
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BASKETBALL SPECIAL

**The Glorious
In-the-Air Show**

**The Horrendous
On-the-Road Show**

**The Best Sixth Man—
Bullet Mitch Kupchak**

**The SPORT Interview:
Al McGuire**

**Keys to the
NCAA Playoffs:**

**Duke's Tenacious
Mike Gminski**

**Notre Dame's Bruising
Kelly Tripucka**



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Peter Accetta
New York City, New York



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No one is prouder of the Blue Devils' inexhaustible center than his father Joe, who quit his job when Mike was eight and devoted his life to making the youngster an All-America
By RICHARD O'CONNOR

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The flamboyant former coach, now a business executive, holds forth on the NCAA tourney, coaching, his new career as a TV announcer and his restless spirit: "I'm looking for something almost unattainable"
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Traded to Boston in 1978, Eck won 20 games for the first time. But his wife stayed in Cleveland with his best friend
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On a typical trip that covered 7,000 miles in nine days, the Houston Rockets survived one blizzard, several detours, four losses in six games and extreme fatigue. The NBA schedule, the author reports, has "rigged" the game in favor of the home team
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"Why ride," says one player, "when you can fly?" This photo essay shows some of basketball's highest fliers acting like the law of gravity was never discovered
By RICHARD TURNER



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John Wensink "The truth is, I didn't do a thing to improve"
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Mitch Kupchak, the Washington Bullets' board-banging, sharp-shooting supersub, "lives life like he plays ball—in a hurry and a little reckless"
By MARK RIBOWSKY

78 Andy Bean Gets Mad at Good Shots

The third-leading money winner on the PGA Tour last year also manhandles alligators, bites through golf balls and works like hell to be the best. Yet he admits, "I got to be more patient"
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84 Kelly Tripucka: "He Likes It Rugged"

Having learned aggressiveness early from his older brothers, Tripucka had no trouble achieving instant stardom at Notre Dame. "I don't play dirty," he says, "but I rough it up"
By MARK GOODMAN

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Cover photographed by Carl Skalak Jr.

SPALDING

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SPORT LETTERS

COGITATING COSELL

While causing a blitz on dictionaries throughout the land, the SPORT Interview with Howard Cosell (January) by Dave Anderson was a true personification of Cosell's intelligence and wit.

Tom Baird
San Diego, Cal.

Compelling and all-pervading in its immediacy, protestations notwithstanding, it eschewed the optimum lassitude of a palpable absurdity. Inherently it categorically derogates an ambivalent anecdotalization which. . . .

Yes, Howard, you did use all these words (?) and more. But that's okay—even if I don't understand you, I like you.

Norm Eklund
Sumner, Wash.

I think Cosell is probably the most overrated, facetious, asinine, big-mouthed, horse's-ass, so-called commentator I've ever had the misfortune to listen to and read about.

Terry Singleton
Nacogdoches, Tx.

THE NCAA: JUST OR UNJUST

I commend your comprehensive article "The Shocking Inequities of the NCAA," by Paul Good (January). Many athletes, often coming from ghettos, have been unfairly barred from athletic participation for minor violations, thus depriving them of their one opportunity in life to improve their lifestyle.

NCAA procedures should be changed to establish equal justice for all.

Ray Maki
Las Vegas, Nev.

Your story on the NCAA is grossly unfair and untrue. The people who squawk the most seem to be those who are guilty of infractions or are afraid they might be caught. We need the NCAA to protect the public and honest colleges.

James V. Nuhall
East Hartford, Conn.

BUCKY'S SEARCH

I want to thank Richard O'Connor for his story, "Bucky Dent's 15-Year-Search for His Father" (January). Not only was it a touching story, but it makes Bucky seem more human—not just another faceless superstar.

Norma Irizarry
New York, N.Y.

CANDLESTICK SCHTICK

In your article "Clark the Spark" (November), by Jack Hicks, you made the major mistake of combining two people into one; one being myself and the other Tarzan. When you described Tarzan, you stated that his face was "painted half in black and half in orange." There is only one person at Candlestick Park who paints his face this way and that person is me. I also wear a pair of rabbit ears (one black and one orange), black pants and an orange Giants T-shirt.

But many people are now thinking that Tarzan is me. It took me a whole season to establish myself as the cheerleader for the S.F. Giants and establishing a name for myself. Your article has partially destroyed the image which took me so long to build.

Hopalong (David Calgario)
San Francisco, Cal.

The author replies: While I acknowledge superfan Hopalong's zealous cheerleading during the 1978 Giant season, I cannot retract the truth. Tarzan does exist, his face painted fully as colorfully as Hopalong, and Mr. Calgario must live in the spotlight with him. For my money, they are both diminished by Disco Dot, 400-pound queen of Candlestick Park, the biggest Giant fan of them all.

—Jack Hicks

QUIZZICAL

In your SPORT Quiz, January, you stated that four Heisman Trophy winners also played in the Super Bowl. I believe you are wrong; there were five. Paul Hornung won the Heisman in 1956 and played in Super Bowl I (1967).

Bill Cooke
Schenectady, N.Y.

The editor's reply: A number of our readers remembered Hornung in the 1967 Super Bowl, but in fact he never played. An injury to his neck suffered in Green Bay's win over Chicago during the '66 season kept Heisman-winner Hornung out of action in Super Bowl I.

Due to an error, the January quiz answers on Question 5 were incorrect. The answers are: A—3, B—1, C—2.

Letters To SPORT
641 Lexington Ave.
New York, N.Y. 10022

SPORT TALK

SPOILSPORTS OF 1978

Before we all get too caught up in the rush of sporting events this new year, it seems fitting to cast a last backward glance at 1978 and to wave a fond but welcome good-bye to the "spoilsports" of 1978. A "spoilsport," as we defined it in our inaugural ceremonies on these pages in the March, 1977, issue, is one who denies all of us fans the pleasures of sport, whether through greed, self-righteousness, stupidity or the impassioned skullduggery men and women are wont to resort to when they are about to be mightily embarrassed. Here then, are the spoilsports of 1978.

THE EARL WEAVER AWARD

Baltimore manager Earl Weaver entered the Spoilsport Hall of Fame on June 25 in Toronto last year. In the middle of the fifth inning, the Blue Jays were leading Weaver's Orioles 19-6, having shellacked starter Mike Flanagan and taken dead aim at the Red Sox's 28-year-old record for most runs scored in a game—29. Then spoilsport Weaver brought in, first, outfielder Larry Harlow and then 37-year-old catcher-coach Elrod Hendricks to pitch. The two permitted the Jays only five more runs and, thanks to Weaver, the final score—24-10—fell short of the record.

THE LARRY CANADAY MEMORIAL COACH-GOURMAND AWARD

Canaday is the Eau Gallie (Fla.) High School football coach who inspired his

team to victory by biting the heads off frogs (see Sport Talk, January, 1978). Perhaps taking a page out of Canaday's cookbook, Baylor football coach Grant Teaff found something similar to spark his Bears against heavily favored Texas on November 25. Teaff slid a dead, five-inch earthworm into his mouth.

"The team went berserk," he said. "I had hoped this would relieve the tenseness." Baylor won 38-14.

DEBUT OF THE YEAR

The National League Spoilsport Manager of the Year is the Pirates' Chuck Tanner. On September 14, in a game against the Mets, Pittsburgh rookie Doe Boyland, a lefthanded batter, faced Met righthander Skip Lockwood in his first major-league at-bat.

"For many years I dreamed of what I might do on my first major-league at-bat," Boyland said. "I dreamed of hitting a home run with the bases loaded."

Unfortunately, Lockwood got two strikes on Boyland and Met manager Joe Torre brought in lefty pitcher Kevin Kobel. Tanner countered by pinch-hitting with righty Rennie Stennett.

Boyland sat in the dugout and watched Kevin Kobel throw strike three to Stennett—a strikeout which, under baseball rules, was charged to rookie Boyland's first at-bat.

THE PANTS DOWN AWARD . . .

Is hereby presented to the NFL club owners—especially those in San Diego, Chicago, Baltimore and New Orleans, who were caught with their pants down when their teams' jiggly cheerleaders posed for *Playboy* Magazine with their pants down. The San Diego and New Orleans squads were disbanded; those cheerleaders who had posed in other cities—with the club's initial encouragement—were fired. "It's hypocritical for these young women to be asked to show their sex appeal on TV, then be fired for doing the same thing in the magazine," said a *Playboy* spokesman. It's downright eye-smarting.

THE CHOPPED-LIVER CUP

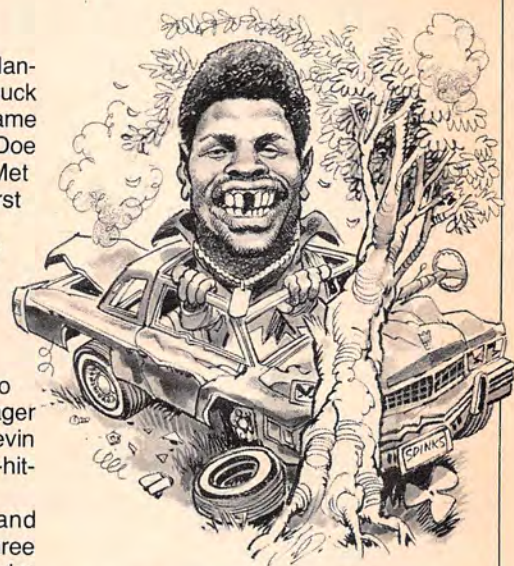
A replica of the Davis Cup sculpted entirely out of chopped liver is awarded to tennis player Vitas Gerulaitis, who skipped the Davis Cup finals against Britain. "I only got \$2,000 to play

in the semifinals in Sweden," Gerulaitis complained. "Sure, it's an honor to play for your country, but professionals can't play for the love of it."

Gerulaitis had earned over \$425,000 prior to the Davis Cup finals.

THE BEST DEFENSE IS A STOLEN CAR

Former heavyweight champion Leon



Spinks' \$18,000 Cadillac was found smashed into a tree in Lorain, Ohio last December, the third accident involving Spinks' car in three months. Spinks called police from a local tavern and reported the car had been stolen.

SORE LOSER OF 1978

Sour grapes abounded as ever among sports figures last year, but baseball produced one of the top spoilsports.

Dodger shortstop Bill Russell was preeminent. After he and his mates had been criticized for misplaying enough grounders during the World Series to make it appear they were playing on a rocky mountainside in Greece, Russell explained: "Of course, you expect it [criticism] in New York. The writers are the worst. The city is the worst. Of course, if you live here long enough, I guess it's only natural that you become an ass." Sometimes you don't even have to live there, Bill.

CORPORATE DECISIONS OF THE YEAR

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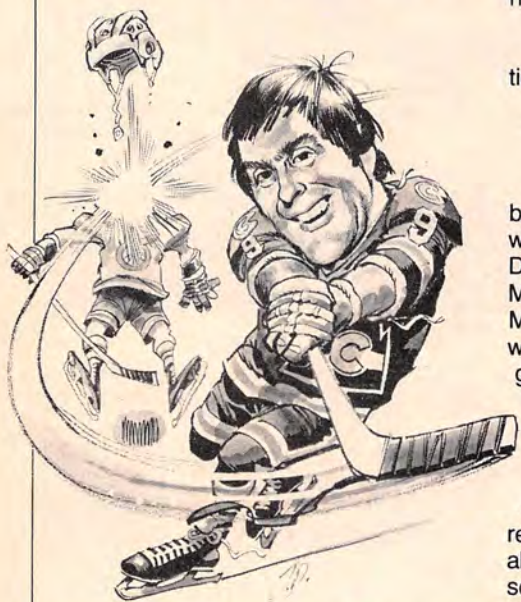
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SPORT TALK

Goods Company, which decided not to renew its \$250-a-year-plus-royalties contract with the Yankees' Gold Glove third baseman Graig Nettles for his signature model mitt. "I still haven't convinced the people at Rawlings that I'm any good," last year's World Series fielding hero told Ross Newhan of the *Los Angeles Times*. "I even wrote the president of the company and never got a reply. I mean, they were even pushing Reggie Jackson gloves and we know he can't field."

THE PAUL BUNYAN AWARD

To the hockey player who exhibits the finest lumberjacking technique. Always a difficult decision because of the number of hockey players who wield their lumber so effectively, this year the



award goes to Colorado Rockies' forward Wilf Paiement, who was suspended for 15 games and fined \$500 for poleaxing Detroit forward Dennis Polonich's face with his stick on October 25.

SODOM 24, GOMORRAH 12

If the NFL could run to daylight on the Sunday following President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, why should anyone expect it to postpone its Monday night game in San Francisco last November 27 just because Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk had been assassinated earlier that day?

HEH-HEH

Minnesota Twins owner Calvin Griffith, at a meeting of the Lions Club of Waseca, Minn., said he had moved his club

from Washington to Minneapolis in 1961 "because you only have 15,000 blacks here." Griffith added that Twin batting star Rod Carew was "a damn fool" for signing a multiyear contract at \$170,000 a year.

After the resulting uproar, Griffith confessed: "I had had a couple of drinks and I was trying to be funny, which is a bad combination." Especially when you're not funny.

THE SPOILSPORT SPORTSWRITER OF THE YEAR

Without question, this award goes to the Boston *Globe's* Alan Richman. Richman came down with hepatitis this summer, prompting the inoculation of all the Red Sox. The slow-witted Richman realized only too late the one golden opportunity the disease had afforded him. "Howard Cosell was eating in the press room only a few tables away," Richman recalled. "What an opportunity. I could have passed him my fork."

We invite our readers to suggest additions to the list.

A MEMORABLE RETURN TO DUKE

As a former player who had quit the basketball team several years ago, I was apprehensive about returning to Duke University to research the story on Mike Gminski (see "Duke's Tenacious Mike Gminski," p. 14). But I looked forward to being reunited with Blue Devil guard Jimmy Spanarkel. As soon as I reached Durham I got together with Jimmy, and he thanked me for counseling him during his senior year of high school when dozens of schools were trying to recruit him. He reminded me that, when he'd asked me about Duke, I had called it the greatest school in the country. "I distinctly remember you saying that," Jimmy recalled. "It was a factor in my decision—your praising a school you had left."

I had attended Duke on a basketball scholarship and was the leading scorer on the only undefeated freshman team in Atlantic Coast Conference history. I had a good sophomore year, and again led the Blue Devils in scoring as a junior. Then in 1972 I transferred, along with six teammates, because of various problems with then-coach Bucky Walters. But my problems had nothing to do with Duke University itself, and I was happy that Jimmy Spanarkel, who is from Jersey City, N.J., where I grew up, has been doing so well there since 1975.

I used to play ball against Jimmy during the summer when I was at Duke and he was starring at Hudson Catholic High School. In fact, my last game as a

serious competitor was head-to-head against Jimmy in a summer league in 1975. Our teams were playing for the championship before a packed house, and Jimmy and I were an ideal matchup, both 6-foot-5, 190-pound, very physical guards. He was the up-and-coming star, I was the fading one, and from the opening tipoff we bumped and battled, trying everything to outdo one another.

My mother happened to attend that game. She sat behind a flock of Spanarkel rooters, many of whom had cheered me on years before. Whenever I missed a shot or Spanarkel scored off me, they unloaded a barrage of obscenities: "You're a washed-up blank, O'Connor." Once, when I was taking the ball out of bounds, the obscenities were so vehement that I turned toward the stands. I caught a glimpse of my mother. Her eyes were filled with moisture. She couldn't understand why the fans were so vicious at this meaningless game. I wanted to race up the bleachers and bash every shouter, but, of course, I didn't. So I took my vengeance out on Spanarkel. And he came back at me elbow for elbow, bruise for bruise, basket for basket. My team won, but in that game Spanarkel's better all-round play convinced me to closet my sneakers.

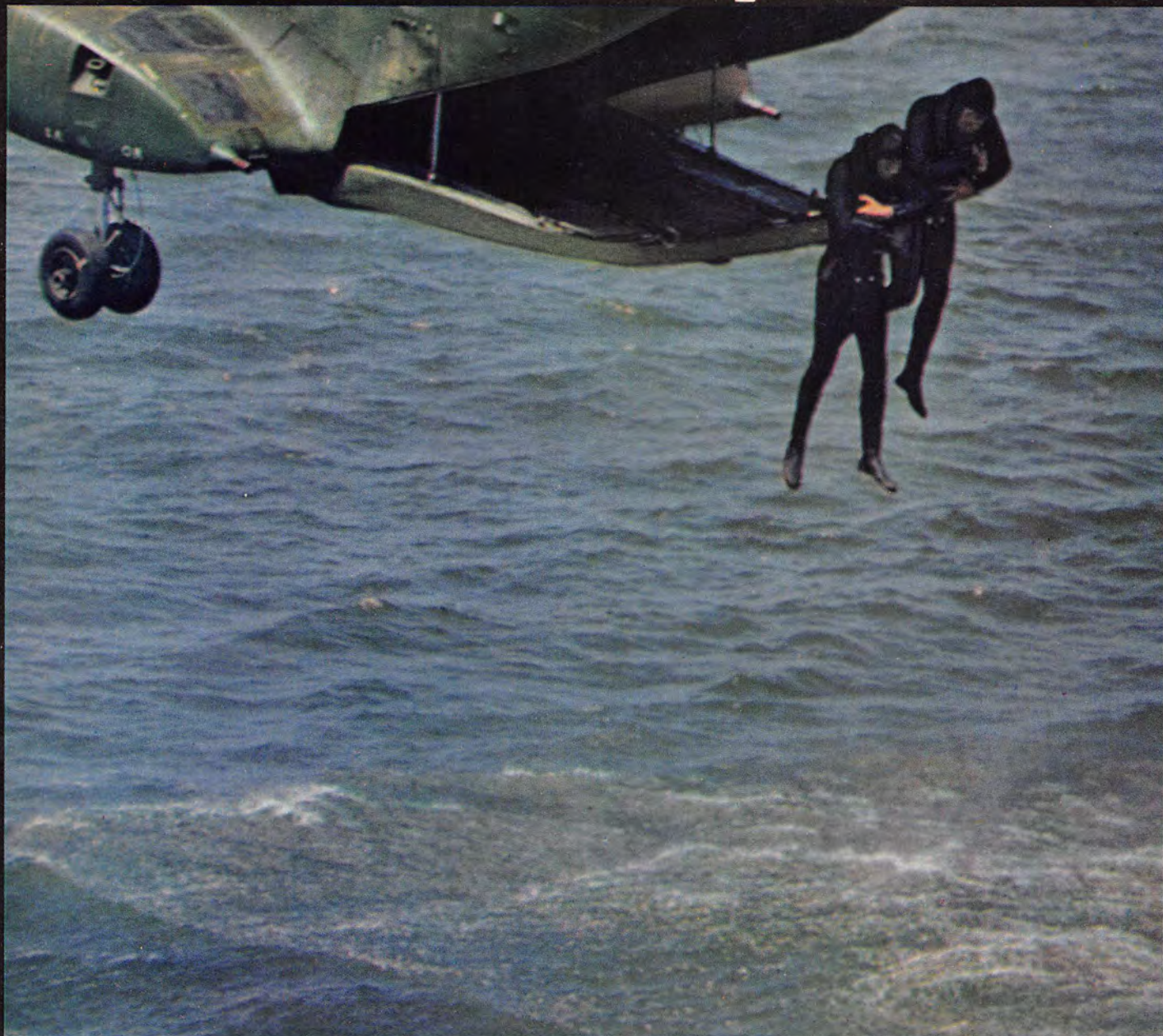
Before the Duke-LaSalle game early this season, which I was covering, I called Gary Melchionni, my roommate and backcourt partner at Duke, and asked him to join me. We sat at the press table and recalled many pleasant memories at Duke (he graduated and played briefly in the NBA). At one point a few Duke students came by and asked us if we really belonged to the name tags by our seats. "Yes," we said. The students said they were sorry they never got to see our freshman team play. "They still talk about that team," said one student. "God, you guys averaged almost 100 points a game."

When the LaSalle game began, I watched Gminski and Spanarkel closely. Seeing them race up and down court, I suddenly felt yesterday's echo—and along with it, the joy which filled me so many nights in the Duke Indoor Stadium. I can see Gary and me coming downcourt on a break, the Duke fans out of their seats applauding wildly as Bob McAdoo or John Roach or Bobby Jones or Brian Winters backpedal to defend against us. Gary goes up for the layup, the defender converges. At the last moment Gary passes off. I score the basket. We run downcourt smiling and slapping palms . . . just as Spanarkel scores.

Jimmy smiles. I smile. The past and present have come together, and I feel as if I have never really left Duke.

—Richard O'Connor

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SPORT QUIZ

GRADE YOURSELF 17-19 EXCELLENT 14-16 VERY GOOD 11-13 FAIR

1. Which player led the NBA in combined total rebounds, assists and points (3,405) in 1977-78?

- a. Dan Issel
- b. David Thompson
- c. Bob McAdoo

2. Two of these NBA players scored in double figures in 80 or more games last season. Who didn't?

- a. Truck Robinson
- b. Artis Gilmore
- c. Larry Kenon

3. Name the active NBA players who were teammates on the 1972 U.S. Olympic basketball team.

4. Which player led the NBA in technical fouls (15) in 1977-78?

- a. Eric Money
- b. Ricky Sobers
- c. Mike Bantom

5. Which NBA team owns the record for holding its opposition under 100 points the most times (56) in a season since the inception of the 24-second clock?

- a. Boston Celtics
- b. Chicago Bulls
- c. New York Knicks

6. Match these NBA players with their real first names:

- | | |
|---------------------|------------|
| a. Junior Bridgeman | 1. Robert |
| b. Campy Russell | 2. Maurice |
| c. Sonny Parker | 3. Ulysses |
| d. Bo Ellis | 4. Michael |

7. Which team was not beaten by Duke in last year's NCAA basketball tournament?

- a. Rhode Island
- b. Michigan State
- c. Pennsylvania

8. Which team is second to UCLA in the number of NCAA championships won (5)?

- a. Marquette
- b. Indiana
- c. Kentucky

9. Which quote has been attributed to Reggie Jackson?

- a. "I can't wait until tomorrow, 'cause I get better looking every day."
- b. "Hitting a home run is better than sex."
- c. "I'm the spoon that stirs the coffee."

10. Which of these teams has gone the longest without winning a world championship?

- a. New York Rangers
- b. Cleveland Indians
- c. Washington Redskins

11. Rollie Fingers' 37 saves for the San Diego Padres in 1978:

- a. was more than any American League team's total
- b. led the majors for the third year in a row
- c. put him first in career saves among active pitchers

12. Which player has the most home runs (171) over the last five seasons?

- a. George Foster
- b. Mike Schmidt
- c. Dave Kingman

13. Match these American League pitchers with the categories in which they were league leaders in 1978:

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| a. R. Guidry | 1. homers allowed |
| b. M. Caldwell | 2. innings pitched |
| c. J. Palmer | 3. shutouts |
| d. D. Eckersley | 4. complete games |

14. In 1978, Montreal Expos outfielder Ellis Valentine:

- a. had two assists in an inning three times
- b. had the same number of home runs, RBIs, stolen bases and triples as in 1977
- c. played all three outfield positions in both games of a double-header

15. True or False: A 42-112 record in 1952 was the worst record ever accumulated by a Pittsburgh Pirates team.

16. Which golfer did not lose to Andy Bean in sudden-death playoffs in 1978?

- a. Tom Kite
- b. Bill Rogers
- c. Lee Trevino

17. Who is the only NHL player to score five points in a game twice in his rookie season?

- a. Bobby Orr
- b. Don Murdoch
- c. Bryan Trottier

18. Name the only NHL expansion team other than the Philadelphia Flyers whose goalies won the Vezina Trophy for the best goaltending.

19. Which player with over 800 yards gained led the NFL in rushing average (5.5) last season?

- a. Greg Pruitt
- b. Earl Campbell
- c. Wilbert Montgomery

20. Which player led the NFC in receptions by a wide receiver last season?

- a. Sammy White
- b. Harold Carmichael
- c. Ahmad Rashad

FOR ANSWERS TURN TO PAGE 77

Lee Trevino



Tom Kite



Bill Rogers



Duke's Tenacious Mike Gminski

No one is prouder of the Blue Devils' inexhaustible center than his father Joe, who quit his job when Mike was eight and devoted his life to making the youngster an All-America

By RICHARD O'CONNOR

One afternoon when Mike Gminski was 11, his father Joe took him to a football field near their home in Monroe, Conn. It was snowing heavily as the two figures trudged across the field and through the biting gusts of wind. Mike took a football from his father and walked off until they were 30 yards apart. Mike began kicking the ball high and far into the snowstorm. His father retrieved the ball after each kick and tossed it back to his son. After a while, Mike stopped punting and began throwing long, spiral passes to his father 40 yards downfield. But his father, now a blur in the distance, was blinded by the snow and unable to catch the passes; instead, he repeatedly chased the ball. The practice continued for two hours. A few weeks later Mike won his age group's National Punt, Pass & Kick championship before a huge crowd at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

"I had always pushed Mike to be a great athlete," says his father, "and that championship proved to me—and to Mike—that he could be. I've simply dedicated myself to his career."

Indeed he has: In 1967, Joe Gminski—a 6-foot-8 former member of the University of Connecticut basketball team who went on to become a prosperous salesman—quit his job and began training his eight-year-old son to become an All-America athlete. "I wasn't a great player at Connecticut," Joe says, "but I might have been if I had someone willing to work with me. I didn't. So in a sense, I'm living my ambitions through my son."

Hearing this you immediately think of Jimmy Piersall or Jimmy Connors or countless other athletes whose childhoods were consumed by their parents' ambitions. Generally, these parent-made athletes progressed faster physically than they did emotionally. They became spoiled, obnoxious, disdainful of authority. They viewed themselves as the center of the universe around which everything else revolves.

So before you encounter Mike Gminski, Duke University's All-America center, you're a little skeptical. You wonder about things like maturation, adjustment and about his development as a person.

Friday Night, December 1. The Big-Four Tournament in Greensboro, N.C. includes all that state's Atlantic Coast Conference schools: Duke, North Carolina, North Carolina State and Wake Forest. All except Wake Forest are ranked in the nation's top ten. This tournament will determine, for the time being, the state's—and possibly the nation's—top team.

Outside the Greensboro Coliseum tickets are being scalped for \$200 apiece. Inside, the crowd is frenzied, the noise deafening as wave after wave of music from each school's band splashes across

the floor. In this part of the country, ACC basketball tournaments are tantamount to World Series.

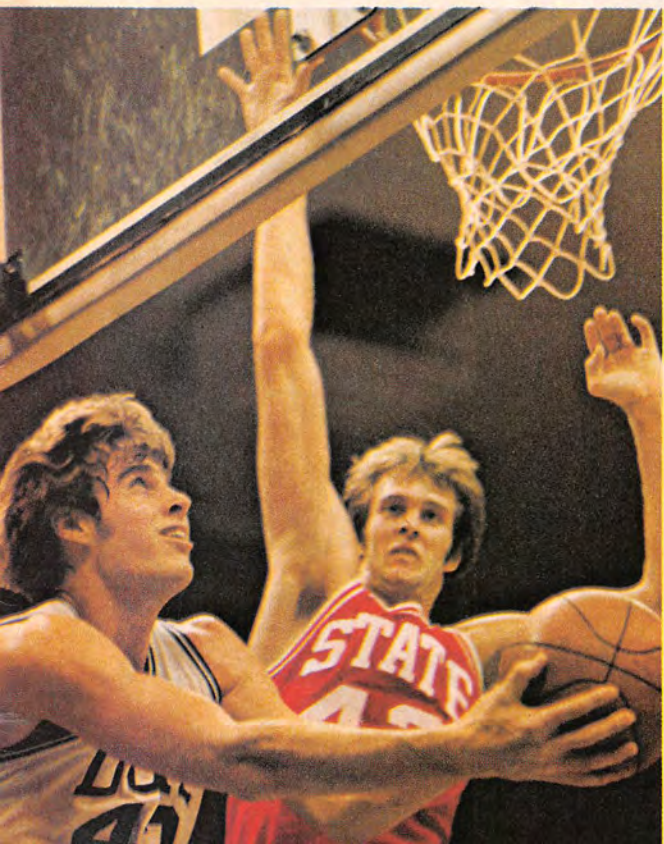
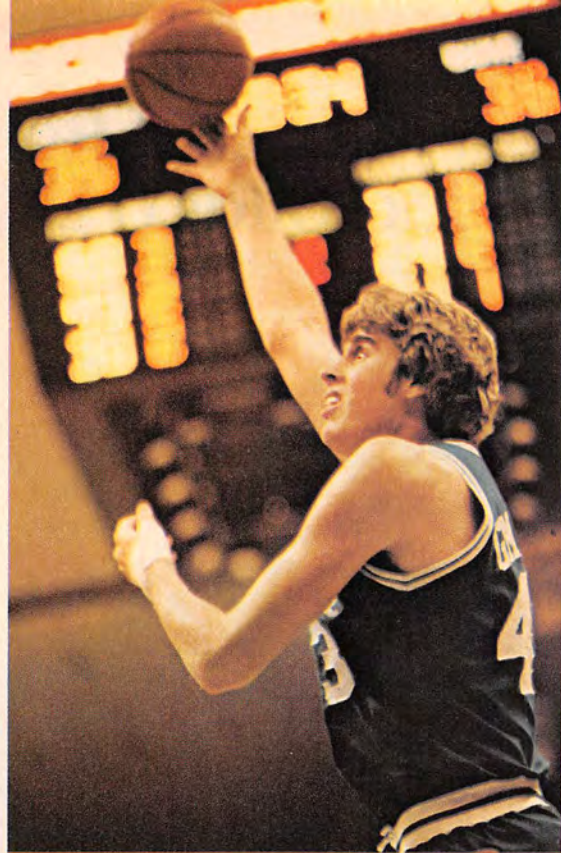
At 8:45, the Duke Blue Devils—led by 6-foot-11 junior Mike Gminski—take the floor against N.C. State. At 9:00, the opening tap is tossed and minutes later Gminski gets the ball in the low post. Gminski is leaned on by State's 6-11 center Craig Watts. Gminski fakes right, whirls left and scores on a layup. Soon thereafter, Gminski takes a pass, turns to the baseline and tosses in a sky hook. On subsequent exchanges, he hits a 15-foot jumper, followed by a tap-in. With 3:50 left in the half, Duke forward Gene Banks rebounds and passes the ball to guard Jim Spanarkel as Gminski races down the left sideline. Spanarkel lofts a long pass which Gminski leaps and catches at the foul line. Without dribbling, Gminski soars skyward and emphatically dunks the ball. The Duke fans explode in near hysteria. At the half, Gminski has 11 points and Duke leads by one, 46-45.

In the second half, State plays slow-down. With seven minutes left in the game, and the Wolfpack behind by two, a State guard drives the left side of the lane and goes up for a layup. Gminski leaves his man and blocks the shot, slapping the ball to his teammate, Bob Bender. Duke comes down the floor, scores and goes on to win 65-63. Gminski has scored 15 points, grabbed eight rebounds and blocked three shots.

The following evening, Duke meets Carolina (which beat Wake Forest) for the Big-Four championship and falls behind by nine points in the early going. Carolina is playing a zone defense. Its big men are fronting and backing Gminski. The Duke players work the ball around the periphery while Gminski moves back and forth along the baseline, following the movement of the ball, his hand held high, signaling that he wants the ball. At one point, Gminski stops and sees his defender is trying to watch both him and the ball. When the defender looks right, Gminski sneaks left and posts in front of him. "C'mon, I'm open!" he shouts. Startled by the remark—Mike seldom says a word while playing—his teammate tosses the ball inside to him. Gminski pivots, dribbles once and fires in a sky hook. Charging back upcourt, he jabs his fist in the air. From then on, the Blue Devils take control, winning 78-68, preserving their No. 1 ranking.

Gminski is selected as the tournament's Most Valuable Player. He has scored, rebounded, blocked shots and passed off smartly against every defense his opponents used. He has displayed an impressive combination of speed, cool

Gminski's shot-blocking and scoring led Duke to victory in the ACC's Big-Four tourney, where Mike was named MVP.



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Mike Gminski

and court savvy, the same combination which led the young Blue Devils to a surprising second-place finish in last year's NCAA championships, and which is expected to earn them a good shot at the title this March. When Mike accepts his award, he raises his index finger to the Duke fans who immediately start chanting, "Salt Lake City" (the site of this year's NCAA finals). Gminski is beaming radiantly until the chant suddenly changes to "G-man . . . G-man," Mike's nickname. Mike looks embarrassed and he quickly disappears as if this adoration is a rainstorm he must get out of.

Joe and Chris Gminski live in an apartment near the Duke campus. Their den is a kind of museum dedicated to their son. The walls are covered with pictures, plaques, certificates and trophies from Mike's brilliant career. His high school uniform is encased in an elaborate frame.

In a large closet are all of Mike's scrapbooks, the pages of which are protected by acetate paper.

"We've tried to keep almost everything written on Mike," says Joe Gminski, handing a visitor one of Mike's earliest scrapbooks.

The visitor flips through the pages while Chris and Joe lean over his shoulder. Seeing the photo of Mike accepting his PP&K award, Joe says, "That championship did more for Mike's outlook than anything. He saw how winning athletes are treated royally, but more important, he learned how hard work and discipline are prerequisites for athletic excellence. Until then, I was the sole push behind him, but after that he gained self-motivation."

Asked at what age Mike was introduced to sports, Joe says without hesitation: "Age two. Remember the window incident, Chris?"

"How could I forget?" says Chris, an attractive woman from Denmark who met her husband during his overseas military duty. "Joe and Mike were playing catch outside and. . ."

"Excuse me, Chris," Joe interrupts, "let me just explain this. I say, 'Okay, Mike, hum the old fastball,' and, whew, here comes this pitch that sails right over my head and through the front window." Joe smacks his hands together.

"And there I was," Chris says, "sitting in the living room, when I hear this crash and see a ball rolling by my feet. Well, I was angry and I went outside." Chris smiles affectionately at her husband. "There were the two of them laughing hysterically. I had to laugh, too. Joe was so proud of Mike then."

"I knew right there," Joe says, "that Mike was going to grow up to be some-

thing special. I told Chris: 'Honey, this kid is gonna make the Gminski name go down in sports history.'"

"You know," Chris adds, "people used to ask me how many children I had. I always said two—Mike, the youngest, and Joe, the oldest."

Another scrapbook: Mike's grade-school years. The visitor reads how as a Little Leaguer Mike pitched 13 games and won them all. He was also the league's leading hitter. Once he hit a line drive so hard it KO'd a first baseman.

"He was eventually banned from Little League," Joe says. "The league officials came to us and said, 'We're sorry, but your son is just too good.'"

So Mike, who had never played tennis before, took up that sport and in a few months made the high school varsity tennis team.

"Let's face it," says Joe, "the kid was a natural talent. What distinguishes the great ones from the good ones are those who dedicate themselves to pushing that natural ability to the zenith. And that's exactly what I tried to do with Mike."

Jim Spanarkel: "If Mike ever gets nasty regularly, he could be awesome"

"That's right," Chris says. "But Mike's sports didn't take away from his classroom responsibility. Mike got straight A's all through school. In fact," Chris smiles at her husband, "you remember the times teachers would call us into school to say Mike was too advanced for his classmates and was spending most of his time fooling around?"

Joe's face lights up. "That kid is something else," he says. "I love him more than life."

The visitor is handed still another of Mike's scrapbooks, which reveals that in Gminski's three years at Masuk High in Monroe, Conn., the basketball team lost only one game, and that Mike's career scoring average (40.7) broke Calvin Murphy's state record.

"I guess it was around junior high school that Mike committed himself totally to basketball," Joe says. "He came to me and said, 'Dad, this is my sport. I want to be good.' But the point was to make him great, so I set up a training regimen—morning and afternoon—six days a week, which Mike adhered to religiously. The schedule included weight lifting, long-distance running, sprints, shooting and rebounding drills. Also, he was forever being fed malteds. I didn't want him to have a skinny body for a big kid—and

now Mike is a big kid at 6-11, 245."

The elder Gminski, realizing all this training was boring, eased the monotony by doing every exercise with Mike: "If he ran ten miles, I ran ten miles," says Joe who, at 43, possesses the firm body of a 20-year-old. "I was a tough taskmaster," Joe says, "but it's paid off, hasn't it?"

Joe no longer works out with his son, but the Gminski's devotion to the young man endures. Last year they left their Connecticut home and moved to Durham, where Duke is situated. They attend all home games and those within a two-hour drive. "We moved so I could have the pleasure of watching my son play," Joe says. "When I quit my job back in 1967, I knew I'd always be following Mike's career. I've been fortunate that my money has held out over the years, but now it's at the end. I have a job here in Durham now with a newspaper distributor and I'm happy as hell."

Last season, the Gminski's promised Mike a new car if he had a good year. Mike had a spectacular year. With funds being short, Joe and Chris saved the expense involved in attending the NCAA finals in St. Louis by staying home. They watched the tournament on television, and soon thereafter handed Mike the keys to a 1979 Camaro Z-28.

At Duke's second home game of the season, the Blue Devils clearly outman LaSalle, which is without its two best players and is playing a stalling game. The halftime score is Duke 12, LaSalle 6. Gminski passes a writer at the press table, smirks and says, "This blows."

The second half is equally boring—except for one significant occurrence. One husky, muscular LaSalle player who is six inches shorter than Mike tries to compensate for the height disparity by constantly jabbing, bumping and elbowing Gminski. At one point, a fan yells, "C'mon, G-man, knock that sucker's head off." As if inspired by the comment, Gminski hauls off and—whack—nails the defender with a vicious elbow to the nose. The LaSalle player blinks, staggers back and shakes his head like a boxer who's just been hit with a left hook. A foul is immediately called.

Duke goes on to win 66-42 as Gminski scores ten points and grabs ten rebounds.

Afterward, in the lockerroom, while Gminski dresses quietly, Captain Jim Spanarkel says, "If Mike ever gets nasty regularly, he could be awesome."

There are many who agree with Spanarkel, who believe that if Gminski were to present more of a physical presence on the court, his game would be complete.

"They may be right," Gminski says, "but when I get pushed around I do respond physically—like I did tonight. Believe me, that guy pissed me off and when I hit him I fully intended to whack him as hard as I could. Basically, I play as phys-

Mike Gmski

ical as the game demands."

"Oh, oh," forward Kenny Dennard says from the next stool. "Mike's being serious and that's not him. He's usually cracking on somebody. He's one of the guys who keeps the team loose."

Dennard abruptly calls to Gmski: "Hey, Mike—what're you gonna be doing in 12 years?"

Gmski, buttoning his shirt, shrugs.

"He'll probably still be trying to be a virgin," Dennard says, laughing.

Gmski stares at Dennard and smiles. "Man, in 12 years I'll still be scoring in double figures—and I don't mean hoops."

A few moments later, Gmski and Gene Banks start ragging each other. "You know," says Banks, "now that there is a Polish Pope, Gmski thinks his people are gonna take over the world. Right, man?"

"Gene," Gmski says, "if my people do take over the world, your people will be back scrubbing the hallways."

A big grin fills Banks' face. He and Gmski exchange a cupped handshake.

Sitting in the corner of the lockerroom, Jim Spanarkel says, "Mike really adds a lot to this team both on and off the court. Personally, I think he can be as great a player as he wants to be."

Gmski and some friends leave the lockerroom and walk back into Cameron Stadium. Mike is immediately besieged by autograph seekers.

Trying to exit, Mike exchanges a few quick words with some fans. In the background Joe and Chris Gmski are talking

to another couple. Without saying a word to them, Mike disappears into the cool night air and heads for a fraternity house and a postgame party.

Already at the house, over 25 brothers and their dates are sprawled around a television watching *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. A few kegs of beer rest on a wooden table. As Gmski arrives, the room suddenly comes alive with handshakes, back-slaps and shouted congratulations. At the bar, Erin Wolf, blond and attractive, calls out, "Hey, Mike, there's a little girl I know who wants an autographed picture of you. Could you get me one?"

Gmski leans close to her. "Sure, Erin," he says. "I know you want it for yourself. You don't have to be bashful."

He continues working his way through the crowd. He is stopped by another girl, who smiles flirtatiously and says, "Great game tonight, Mike."

Gmski purses his lips and nods as a visitor he brought says, "Man, you've got it made on this campus."

Gmski smiles. "Must be my mind they're after, huh?" he says. Then he laughs and drifts into an adjoining room.

More and more people arrive at the party, and most of them stop and talk to Gmski, who seems to enjoy their conversation. He makes people feel comfortable in his presence.

Around midnight Gmski and his visitor leave the fraternity house. "Good party," Mike says. "I wish I could stay longer but I've got exams coming up and I want to get up early tomorrow to do some reading."

The Duke campus is quiet the following

morning. Joe and Chris Gmski, a photographer, and a journalist are waiting for Mike to arrive so they can begin a photo session.

The journalist has just finished telling the photographer of Mike's accomplishments—Mike is the number one vote-getter on the All-Academic team, state chairman for the multiple sclerosis fund-raising drive and a volunteer for the Christmas Seal drive—when Mike walks up. He is a handsome, broad-shouldered fellow with tall, blond, blue-eyed good looks.

"Whaddya say," Mike says cheerfully, shaking hands with the journalist.

"You look tired," Joe says.

"Tough night," Mike says grinning. He winks. "Know what I mean?"

The group proceeds along the picturesque campus.

"How's your car been running lately?" Chris asks.

"Not bad," replies Mike. "I had some problems with it a while ago but it's been taken care of."

"How's school?" Joe asks.

"Good—except we're in exams now and I'm trying to get in some extra reading, so it's tough."

The Gmskis continue to ask Mike questions—about his grades, his girl, other teams or players in the ACC. Mike's play is never mentioned. Joe and Chris seem to know little about their son's activities.

The photographer points to a bench surrounded by trees and says, "Okay, let's try a few shots here."

He poses the Gmskis around the bench. Finally he steps back and looks through the camera. "Joe, could you turn more to your left?" he asks.

"Great," says Joe. "My left side is my best side."

"Your best side is your backside," Mike jokes.

After a few quick shots the photographer says, "How about putting your arms around each other?"

The Gmskis look at each other uncertainly.

"No," says Mike, "that's just not our family."

"Yeah," says Joe. "None of that affectionate stuff."

(Later Mike will say: "My family and I have a very close but informal relationship. It's not a demonstrative one. A lot of guys who haven't seen their parents for awhile immediately begin hugging and kissing. Not me. If I don't see my dad for months, I still only shake his hand. My mother I kiss—but that's because she's better looking than my dad.")

When the shooting ends, the group heads to Joe's car. The journalist asks Mike where he is headed for the evening.

"To a Billy Joel concert," Mike says.

"The guy is super."

"Yeah," says Joe Gmski. "He's the

Chris (left) and Joe Gmski moved to Durham, N.C. last year so they could watch Mike play. "My father pushed me hard," Mike says, "but I never resented it."



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Mike Gminski

Piano Man. That song says so much about life, doesn't it?"

Just as Mike is about to leave, a man taps him on the shoulder.

"Mike," he says softly, "I was just wondering if you'd mind taking a picture with my family and me."

Mike sheepishly consents. Watching Mike pose with the stranger's family, Chris says, "That's what makes me so proud of Mike. He's always got time for others. He's not taken up with himself. He's everything his father and I have always hoped he'd be."

Duke coach Bill Foster sits in his plush office beneath Cameron Indoor Stadium and talks about his center: "Mike is one of the finest young men I've ever come across. He's a bright, talented kid. A coach's dream. I mean, he's so incredibly coachable. And that is a real credit to his dad's upbringing. Mike works hard. I don't really have to get on him like I do other players. I remember one game last season when we were down at the end of the first half. I came into the lockerroom looking at the stat sheets. Mike only had a couple of rebounds. All I said was, 'Doing a great job for us on the boards, Mike.' The second half he went out and dominated. Afterward, he said to me, 'Coach, I got your message.'"

Foster thinks a moment. "Mike," he says, "is seemingly capable of attaining anything he wants."

Foster is asked to compare Gminski to other players. Many fans are already suggesting that Mike's dominating play at center is mindful of Bill Walton's (the NBA's Most Valuable Player). But a better comparison might be to Bill Bradley, the dedicated scholar-athlete who is the current U.S. Senator from New Jersey.

"I know Bill Bradley and he's very monastic, very intense about everything," Foster says. "Mike is intense only on the court. Remember, Mike is only 19 and he's still improving. What he ultimately achieves as a basketball player is solely up to him. He could possibly be one of the greatest centers ever."

Foster landed Gminski at Duke through pure luck. In the summer of 1976, Mike was attending the basketball camp run by Maryland coach Lefty Driesell, who felt he had the inside track on Mike. But a counselor at the camp was Terry Chili, then a Duke center and now a Duke assistant coach. At lunch one afternoon in the Duke cafeteria, sitting alongside Gminski, Chili explains, "We had been playing pickup games every day after camp ended and Mike was outplaying many of the big men, some of whom were already in the ACC. So I called coach Foster and said, 'Coach, have I got a cen-

ter for you.' I also told him he'd better get on it quick, because Mike was going to graduate early. The rest, of course, is history."

"And you got a \$35,000 job for that?" Gminski chides.

"What \$35,000!" laughs Chili. "I can't even get my job back at Lefty's camp."

Gminski laughs heartily. "That's right. I forgot."

"Yeah," Chili says, "after Lefty learned how Duke found Mike, he stopped hiring ACC players at his camp."

But why did Mike eventually choose Duke? "Well," he says, "I had taken advanced courses because I wanted out of high school. It lacked a challenge both athletically and academically. When the Duke coaches called, I said I already had my schools picked. I had visited Notre Dame, Maryland, South Carolina, Davidson, William and Mary, and North Carolina. But the Duke coaches seemed nice, so I decided to visit because Duke had everything I wanted in a college—good

"I could score 30 a game, but on this team it's not required, so I don't"

basketball, challenging academics. I fell in love with Duke—not only because of the campus, but because it had the kind of beer-drinking, fun-loving students I knew I could get along with."

Often in the case of a highly recruited athlete, the parents play a major role in helping their son make a final choice of college. "That was not the situation with me," says Mike. "I had total control over my decision. When I returned from my Duke visit, I told my parents, 'That's it. I'm going to Duke.' They didn't say a word."

The 17-year-old Gminski became a starter for Duke as a freshman in 1976. In the third game of the season against Johns Hopkins he flashed his skills with a 22-point, 11-rebound performance. He was even more impressive two games later when Duke played the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Tennessee was led by future pros Bernard King and Ernie Grunfeld. In one sequence, King drove the baseline and tried to power up for a layup, but Gminski blocked the shot. The ball was picked up by Grunfeld, who went skyward. Gminski again rejected the shot, but Grunfeld retrieved the ball and went for the basket again. Gminski blocked his attempt once more. Tennessee coach Ray Mears said afterward, "It was a tremendous display of defensive agility. If Gminski's only a freshman,

I'd hate to imagine how awesome he'll be as a senior."

From that game on, Gminski was a dominating force for the Blue Devils. He ended the year averaging 15.3 points and 10.7 rebounds a game, and he blocked 90 shots. He and N.C. State's Hawkeye Whitney were the ACC rookies-of-the-year.

Last season, Gminski returned with 6-5 guard Jim Spanarkel from Jersey City, N.J. Spanarkel is a remarkable player of diverse talents whose best attribute may simply be that he is a winner. Newly enlisted were two freshmen—Gene Banks, a 6-7 forward from Philadelphia, and Kenny Dennard, a 6-6 forward from King, N.C.—and Bob Bender, a guard who transferred from Indiana University.

Duke finished second in the regular season behind North Carolina, but later defeated Wake Forest in the finals of the ACC tournament and continued on to win the NCAA eastern regionals by defeating Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Villanova. In the semifinals, the Blue Devils upset Notre Dame 90-86 as Gminski scored 29 points.

The finals of the NCAA pitted Duke against Kentucky. The contrast between the two teams was striking: Kentucky with its experienced, emotionless players; Duke with its youthful, spirited players. Kentucky, as expected, won the final 94-88, but Gminski scored 20 points, grabbed 12 rebounds and was named to the all-tournament team. Said Gminski after the Kentucky game: "We have so much to be proud of. Nobody expected us to go this far. When I first came to Duke I hoped to restore some of the tradition it had in the '60s when guys like Jack Marin, Jeff Mullins and Art Heyman played. I think we've accomplished that."

Frank Dascenzo, sports editor of the Durham *Sun*, has been covering the ACC since 1969. "Gminski was the key ingredient in Duke's success," he says. "I've seen all the ACC centers—Tom Burleson, Mitch Kupchak, Tom LaGarde, Bob McAdoo—and there's no question Mike is better than all of them."

Mike Gminski, wearing a plaid shirt, jeans and sneakers, lounges on an elongated bed in his apartment on the Duke campus. Books, clothes and tapes are strewn across the room. On one wall is a poster of a Mexican matador stalking a bull. At the bottom it reads: MIKE GMINSKI.

As Gminski speaks, rock music plays softly on a tape recorder. "The tape recorder is a gift from the Big-Four tournament," says Mike. "Last year we got televisions. It's unbelievable how great the ACC is."

A grin spreads across Mike's face. "Really, I'm so happy here at Duke. I've gotten everything I've ever wanted from a college. Going to the NCAAs made last

year the happiest year of my life. Even though Kentucky won, I think our guys derived more enjoyment out of it. God, did we have fun. We played so well together, each guy looking for the other. It's what basketball's all about: five guys working together for team success."

Gminski is a great offensive player, but always a team player. "When we win, the whole squad—me included—reaps the harvest of national recognition," he says. "Sure, I could score 30 points a game, but on this team it's not required, so I don't. This year we have the potential to go all the way. Our goal is to win the NCAAs."

"And what are your personal goals?" he is asked.

"I want to be the greatest center I can possibly be," Gminski says. "That means maximizing my talents, improving them constantly and not wasting an ounce of potential. If I become the greatest center in the ACC or in the pros, then I've achieved the limits of my talents."

Here in the room—as on the court—

Mike appears relaxed, casual, undisturbed. His game is frequently criticized for its lack of intensity. "I'm just not a very emotional guy," Mike says. "But that doesn't mean I'm lacking in desire. I like to play my game quietly but physically. My actions on the court should speak louder than my words."

The conversation gets around to his father.

"My father had me playing sports when I was two," he says. "I grew up, trained first for football, then baseball, then finally basketball. True, my father pushed me hard in sports, but I never resented it. In fact, I enjoyed it. Look at it this way: He could push but I didn't have to respond. We both knew that I could walk off the court any time I wanted. But I never once wanted to."

"Sure, I took a lot of flack from my friends for working out with my father. They thought it was weird, not so much being with my father, but working out all the time—like that episode in the bliz-

zard. But the more I succeeded, the more recognition I received and the more my friends became envious.

"More than anything, the workouts with my father instilled in me a great deal of self-motivation. I love practice, I love sweating and working hard. I think nothing of just getting up some days and running six miles. The workouts made me more disciplined in attaining things. For instance, Duke is a hard school academically. I've learned to discipline myself during the season. I keep ahead of the academic load by doing papers in advance, by getting up early to read.

"My life has to be that patterned if I'm to succeed in the endeavors I pursue. I think anything is achievable—if you put your mind to it and go after it logically and inexhaustibly."

Which is what Joe Gminski, throwing the ball back and forth with his son on that snowy day eight years ago, tried to say. Only now, the ball is in Mike's hands alone. ■



Gminski has been faulted for not being aggressive enough, but as he showed while blocking a shot by N.C. State's Kendal Pinder and boxing out Craig Watts, he plays "as physical as the game demands."



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THE SPORT INTERVIEW

Al McGuire

By PAUL GOOD



When they write the book on the National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball tournament, Al McGuire would be a natural to do one or all of the following chapters:

"How To Get Into It"—McGuire's Marquette University teams were invited to 11 consecutive postseason tournaments during the years 1964-77, when the Warriors were winning 295 of 375 games (78.7 percent). Nine times they went to the NCAA classic, twice to the National Invitational Tournament, and one of the NIT visits came after McGuire rejected an NCAA invitation.

"How To Blow It"—In the 1974 finals at Greensboro, N.C. McGuire drew two quick technicals by prancing onto the court in a temper tantrum. North Carolina State cashed nine points and went on to victory.

"How To Win It as a Last Hurrah"—McGuire announced his coaching retirement early in the 1976-77 season, when the Warriors were rated a tournament shoo-in. They lost two games in a row after that morale-buster, staggered back into form, then seemed a shoo-out as they lost their final three home games. But they rebounded and won four of their last five on the road, received an NCAA bid and won the national championship with an emotional 67-59 victory over the University of North Carolina.

Now McGuire—if you take him at his word—might not be interested in writing any of the above chapters.

"I don't enjoy basketball anymore," he says. "I never go to games or watch them on TV unless I have to. The sport had run its course for me by the time I left Marquette. I had to get out because I wasn't getting any kicks unless it was a pressure game. Watching now, my head starts clocking the time, the scores, the fouls, the rhythm, the attitudes of the officials—and I just really don't enjoy basketball anymore."

The flamboyant former coach, now a business executive, holds forth on the NCAA tourney, coaching, his new career as a TV announcer and his restless spirit: "I'm looking for something almost unattainable"

Maybe. Head fakes are as much a part of his verbal game as straight-on drives. But he does have his diversions. Today, at 50, McGuire is vice-chairman of the board of Medalist Industries, which has net sales of well over \$100 million annually. He earns at least \$75,000 a year at Medalist, which makes everything from uniforms to automated machinery.

Speaking engagements bring McGuire the kind of walking-around money you couldn't get rid of on a treadmill. And he also has a three-year, six-figure contract with NBC-TV as a sports commentator, which will have him covering the final round of the NCAA championship in Salt Lake City in March.

All of which is quite an achievement for the son of a bar owner in the Irishtown section of Rockaway Beach, N.Y. Al was a player who had only modest skills as a 6-foot-2 rebounding swingman during four NBA seasons

with the New York Knicks and Baltimore Bullets during the early '50s. But he also had an omnivorous hunger to win, a strong grasp of basketball essentials, unbounded energy and a gift-and-a-half of gab. These qualities made him a successful coach and a media darling. For 20 seasons, he was as good for basketball as basketball was good for him. Which was very good indeed.

McGuire left the game with the kind of celebrity status that few coaches ever achieve. Fans loved him as the quintessential Irishman whose temper drove him to splinter chairs and almost—but never quite—lay violent hands on referees. (He did slap around an occasional player but that was not forbidden by NCAA rules.) McGuire was properly irreverent, coaching at a Catholic school and not above making references to "Sister Mary Applesauce." He had taken potshots at NCAA hotshots, and had endeared himself to the NAACP early on by playing more blacks than the quota system thought chic.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON MODRA

After working part-time for Medalist during his Marquette days, he roared into the business world fulltime two years ago on his 1200cc Harley-Davidson motorcycle, tooling to work at Medalist headquarters. "I'm here to run the company," he told a *Fortune* magazine editor. "For the next few years, Medalist will be Al McGuire."

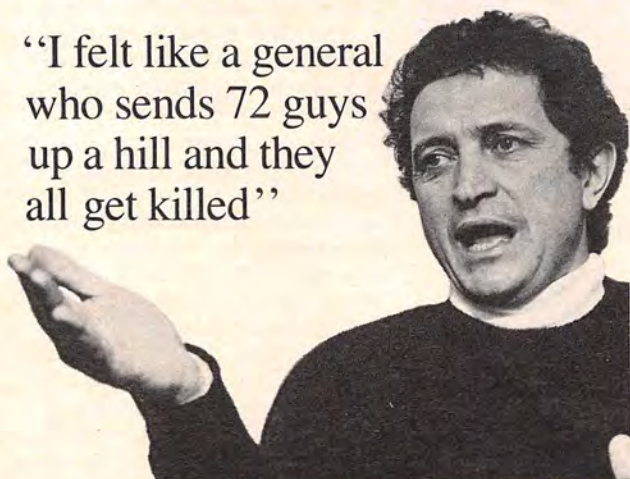
One division head who wasn't charmed by the curly-haired ex-coach put a full-boardroom press on McGuire and soon found himself on the sidelines, his resignation accepted by Medalist chairman and McGuire-admirer Norman J. Fischer. Today, the coach and the company prosper in unison.

McGuire, obviously, makes things happen. Last fall, he created the Al McGuire Five-Mile Run through the heart of Milwaukee. Capitalizing on jogger-mania, the event raised \$20,000 for the Milwaukee Children's Hospital Limb Bank and attracted 4,100 runners, including McGuire, who finished the five miles in approximately as many minutes as he has years.

What makes McGuire run?

The answers an interviewer gets provide sharp views of the inner world of basketball combined with fuzzy glimpses of a man who makes a fetish out of his seeming spontaneity as he unloads his store of quips. Samples: "If you accept Al McGuire, then it's like being married—you gotta accept the curlers in my hair in the morning and diarrhea." "Being a basketball coach isn't fair. You're 30,

"I felt like a general who sends 72 guys up a hill and they all get killed"



then you're 40, 50 and the kids stay 17½."

His Medalist office is a compound of contradictions: He points out narrow stained-glass windows cannibalized from a demolished building, evidence of his interest in antiquing. A bookcase holds right-wing writer Victor Lasky's hatchet job on John F. Kennedy. A coffee table has *The Inspirational Writings of Rabindranath Tagore on Nature, Love and Life*. (Underlined inside is the sentence, "My fancies are fireflies, specks of living light, twinkling in the dark.") The table also supports Kahlil Gibran's Persian version of *Love Story*. Beside it is an ancient "Dick and Jane" primer: "See. Dick holds the ball. Jane plays with Spot . . ." There are penny-candy dots on paper rolls, a brass hors d'oeuvre set from the Philippines, three old-time alphabet blocks, a porcelain ballerina and her guy in tights. And on the walls, many paintings of semisad clowns, one of them dribbling a basketball. In this setting, the interview began.

SPORT: With the NCAA playoffs approaching, give me a quick prediction of who the final four teams will be.

McGUIRE: Notre Dame, Duke, UCLA and Louisville.

SPORT: You went down the playoff road many times. What's it like? Do teams choke under playoff pressure?

McGUIRE: Oh, I think they're all chokin' to a degree. They wouldn't be human if they didn't. There's the media Mt. Everest, the undercurrent of electricity that encompasses the whole host city.

SPORT: Do some players turn on, play better?

McGUIRE: I don't think so. If they've had a good game, afterward they'll say, "Oh boy, I always like that pressure." But that's after. Even coaches reveal their game plan after it's over. [Laughs.] But what they're really doin' is just telling you what *happened* to happen in the game.

SPORT: What was it like for you as a coach?

McGUIRE: The pressure never bothered me because I've always been personally part of that world. I've felt excitement around me all my life. The major problem is that you get wore out getting to the Final Four. You go through two or three weekends of short tickets and everybody wants one. Then you've got five times the media needing attention. You got your normal practices and player tensions. You get drained and tired, and when you're tired you obviously can't coach. You've got to improvise immediately during a game, make quick decisions and you can't do it wore out. I tried to counter that, but one time I got caught and blew a national championship.

SPORT: The final against North Carolina State in 1974 when you committed those two technicals?

McGUIRE: I would say North Carolina was better than us, but we were on top of our game in the first half. It's not the best team that wins. It's the team on the uptick that wins. When you get that momentum—which is an overused word I try never to use on TV—boy, the rim becomes like a rain barrel and everything you throw up goes in. But the technicals turned it around. I think I just blanked out. It was a mortal sin because I was a pro who sometimes took personal fouls as a tactic, but never like that. Those were absolutely purposeless. I felt like a general who sends 72 guys up a hill and they all get killed and all he can think is he hadn't slept good. In the lockerroom after the game [Marquette forward] Maurice Lucas said, "Well, you blew that one, Coach." I said, "Hey, you wouldn't have gotten here without me," and that ended that.

SPORT: How did you handle players, from recruiting on up?

McGUIRE: I recruited one kid a year for 13 years and missed twice. One was Jim McMillian and the other Brian Winters. The whole 11 were pros. Maurice Lucas, Dean "the Dream" Meminger, George "Brute Force" Thompson, Jimmy Chones, Larry McNeill, Butch Lee, Bo Ellis, Earl Tatum—the most talented player I ever had—

SPORT: They were all black, weren't they?

McGUIRE: Let's see, yeah, that's right.

SPORT: How did an Irishman from Rockaway Beach, which is not exactly a bastion of racial understanding, happen to relate so well to blacks?

McGUIRE: I don't know. If I did, I'd sell it to Ford tomorrow. [Laughs.] Maybe they sensed a wholesomeness; I wasn't a conniver, didn't call you "Man" and rub your head. Obviously I saw color. There were heavy quotas when I started but I just didn't go by them. People around basketball were super aware of race because guys were runnin' around undressed. I'd say today in the NBA they're aware they need a certain amount of white players. The, uh, fairest way to put it is, if a black and white player are equal, I think the white player would get the edge in time played and pictures in the programs.

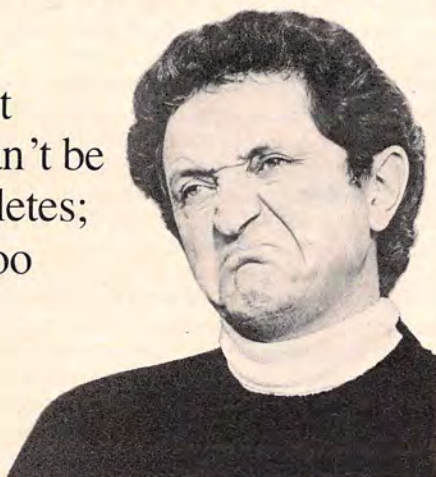
SPORT: Didn't you have an "equality" problem with your son Allie when he played at Marquette?

McGUIRE: [Smiles.] Oh yeah. I had four black starters and Al Jr. George Sugar Frazier, who is black, came to me and said, "Coach, I'm as good as your son." I said, "But I love my son, George, so you have to be *better* than him."

SPORT: Why do blacks seem so disproportionately better at the game?

McGUIRE: Look, they don't have better ability than the white kid. But there's a quote I use many times: "Blacks only control two things in America, poverty and basketball." It's their rocket to outer space. The black tidal wave became a reality when the pros put in the 24-second clock. That took basketball from the white man's game—which was an overcoached, firehydrant, muscle-type thing—to a

"Super-intelligent people can't be super athletes; they're too aware"



running, svelte-type thing that blacks, who hadn't had much coaching back then, were accustomed to.

SPORT: Race aside, what did you look for in players?

McGUIRE: I never saw a ballplayer before I recruited him. Never. I was told by my staff. We went after the blue-chip thoroughbred. What it takes to be a great player outside of raw talent is self-centeredness and a certain numbness to the crowd. Super-intelligent people can't be super athletes; they're too aware. A player normally must come from an environment that features the sport and he must specialize. Three-letter men went out with pipes and bow ties. One thing I'll tell you about recruiting. If a kid visits the campus and it's raining, forget it. That's all she wrote.

SPORT: What about recruiting abuses?

McGUIRE: They're not anything like the public and news media believe. Honestly. Everybody is going after the same players and watching everybody else. Hey, I'm not putting my future in the hands of some 17-year-old kid. Who's gonna do that unless they're an idiot and wanna get whacked out?

SPORT: How tough is coaching?

McGUIRE: Once you isolate what's important, it's simple. The biggest problem in coaching is overcoaching. All sports are extremely simple. It's the coaches that make them complex. Eliminate the fifth column—defeatism—and install discipline. Players have to have a fear of you and an absolute team concept. I was not a dedicated coach. I was always a multiple person with different demands on my time. I didn't bother with the X's and O's. I let my assistants do that. But my teams had discipline. Off the court they could muss my hair, but they had fear of me oncourt and did what they were told. No thrills for me, no surprises.

SPORT: How do you know players have the concept?

McGUIRE: You get them into the habit and then when they're running their stuff in the fourth quarter like in the first, you know they have it. People don't realize that in college ball a player only has the ball for 3½ minutes maximum during the game. Success is what you train them to do in the other 36½ minutes.

SPORT: Any coaching tips?

McGUIRE: You never start with the defense you think can beat a team. Start with an off-defense. The first thing that young people and most coaches see they remember. Then when it's engraved on their skull, you alternate, go back to the defense you really think can beat that particular club. Every time a team calls a timeout they're having problems. So you alternate again. There's a reason for everything in coaching, why you yell at a player, work on an official. Coaching is a profession, not a pastime. That's the way you pave the driveway and fill safe-deposit boxes. The weak are out very, very quick.

SPORT: What kind of a job does the media do on the inner game of basketball you're talking about?

McGUIRE: They don't know anything deeper than the first couple of inches of topsoil. Everything they understand is the physicalness of it—which is the second end of it. The first end is within, the positive type of thinking that can make up for the half step a player might lack. But if you have six writers watching a game, they'll all agree on the same star and 90 percent of the time he's the high scorer.

SPORT: What about the TV announcers?

McGUIRE: They all seem to sound the same with different accents. Same jargon, same trivia. I think most announcers are afraid of quiet time. Mainly they're trying to hold basketball clinics that only touch 15 percent of the audience. But 85 percent of the announcers are two-hand dribblers.

SPORT: How about you on the air?

McGUIRE: I honest to God don't know what I'm doin' yet. I try to stay completely human, involved with the life of the game and what's going to happen in the future. I'm completely disinterested in the stat sheets and the school brochures. It doesn't tell me or the audience anything that hasn't already been hammered to death.

SPORT: As you're aware, the NCAA has been under a lot of fire and your network has to go to the NCAA for contracts. You always had the reputation of being a very outspoken guy when it came to the NCAA, and I wonder if you could be running into a conflict of interest. For example, Jerry Tarkanian is involved in a bitter struggle with the Association. Last year when his University of Nevada-Las Vegas team played Marquette, you taped an interview with him that was scheduled for halftime. I'm told NBC dumped it on orders from the NCAA.

McGUIRE: For some reason we never got it on, although I thought Jerry was excellent. I don't know what their decisions are. All I do is make suggestions.

SPORT: Tarkanian says you told him they wouldn't let him use it.

McGUIRE: No. No.

SPORT: Did you wonder if the network had bowed to pressure?

McGUIRE: I doubt that. There was nothing ever said about it.

SPORT: How do you feel about the NCAA?

McGUIRE: There has to be an NCAA, by that name or some other, but there has to be somethin' there. Any problems I had with them involved the protection of my ballplayers and my coaches. Still I know the NCAA likes me. I

don't know why, but there was always a certain amount of respect for me there.

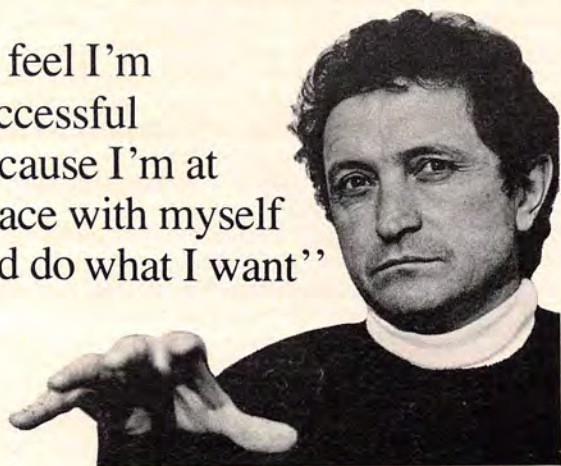
SPORT: Should the NCAA do anything to be more fair to the student-athlete?

McGUIRE: Yes, with the agent problem. The whole thing is sewage. Even though an agent is not supposed to be allowed to solicit an athlete, they do, and it's back-seat-of-the-car stuff. Each school should be allowed to set up a commission—a lawyer, tax man, bank executive—to screen agents going after the blue-chip athlete heading for the pros. Then the commission advises the player on which agent to pick. That takes it out of the toilet.

SPORT: Let's talk about the pros. Do you think you could coach and control a pro team today?

McGUIRE: No, not unless I controlled the purse strings, and I don't know even then because the agents would constantly try to circumvent you to get to the owner or general manager. Agents are like bouncers. If there's not a fight they'll start one because their commissions are tied to the salary, so they're always creating turmoil.

**"I feel I'm
successful
because I'm at
peace with myself
and do what I want"**



SPORT: What about the talent? Some critics say it's slipping badly.

McGUIRE: No, not true. They pros are all talented, talented players. Any college that had two of them would go to the Final Four. The mistake NBA teams make is they forget to pick up the complementary players. They're all hellbent for offensive stars. But superstars need second-rated players who make the team move. They wouldn't be superstars without them.

SPORT: Given the pro game today, what do you see down the line for the NBA?

McGUIRE: The NBA will always exist, but it'll have to schedule fewer games because the body can't take the kind of punishment they're presently getting. I think what has to happen also is a common amount of money each franchise can spend on players, because otherwise you can spend yourself out of existence.

SPORT: What about the big men dominating the game?

McGUIRE: Well, at least in college you're going to have a total-team height requirement.

SPORT: What?

McGUIRE: Where you can't have more than 33 feet in height on the court at one time. It's just a matter of time before somebody gets a couple of 7-2 space-eaters. If you start two or three baseline men at seven feet, then you'll have to bring in Eddie Arcaro to balance it. And eventually you'll see where a rebound cannot be put back up. You'll have to pass it first.

SPORT: What's your pronouncement on women sports writers in men's lockerrooms?

McGUIRE: I think a lot of women writers have nice talent and they should be allowed in. I had 'em in my lockerroom and had no problem. There's gotta be some embarrassment. But when guys go back and forth to the showers, they just gotta stay away from the strike zone.

SPORT: Getting back to the businessman McGuire, how are you getting along with your peers?

McGUIRE: Well, there's always an envy about money. Last year when I started with NBC it was a glamour-type thing for everyone at Medalist. They thought, "Boy, that'll be good exposure for Medalist." Then they got some indications of what NBC is paying me and. . . . [Laughs.] You know, people accept me and like me till they get close to me, and then they want to change me. It happens everywhere I go. But I never wanted to be anyone else but me.

SPORT: You're certainly not short on ego, are you?

McGUIRE: Yeah, I think I need an arena. As Robert Kennedy said, "A man is not made for safe havens." A lot of things I create are on an almost suicidal-type course. I almost challenge you to challenge me. But I work hard. I work seven days a week. I get one or two speaking invitations a day. I was in Peoria recently visiting the Caterpillar tractor company and doing a speaking engagement at Bradley University. So I went to a basketball game there, the first I've been to outside of NBC. And 8,000 people got up and applauded when I was introduced. I sat down and they kept applauding for nearly a minute. I said to myself: "I wish somebody close to me was here to see this." It was like gettin' off a private jet and no one sees you gettin' off. I'm not givin' you any hanky-panky. I don't know why this thing has taken off with me. I get such respect it's frightening. It's something that's just there.

SPORT: Yeah, Al, you draw crowds like a dog draws fleas. That Al McGuire Charity Run, for example. It's great personal publicity but what does it do for Medalist? I didn't see its name in the stories, just yours. How come it was named for you?

McGUIRE: I wanted my own charity. In many ways, I wanted my own identity outside of Medalist involved in the charity. I'd like to see the day when I'm raising a quarter of a million a year for it. I'll get my son Al Jr. into it when I can't run anymore.

SPORT: Don't tell me you're a confirmed jogger.

McGUIRE: Absolutely. Like my motorbike riding, antiquing, walking in the woods, it gives me another avenue to peace. I'll do it for the rest of my life. I had hay fever before, pinched-nerve pains in my neck from old injuries, and they passed. [Laughs.] Of course, pains from jogging came in other places. The knee, Achilles tendon, the nerve that runs up your rear end. But I believe in a certain amount of pain-is-happiness type thing.

SPORT: I guess some people might wonder what makes Al McGuire keep on the run. Have you got some Hound of Heaven at your heels?

McGUIRE: I don't think there's any. I feel I'm successful because I'm at peace with myself and do what I want. The life I lead is very pleasing to me. But anything that pleases has to be worked at. You can't take it for granted whether it's winning the Final Four or helping to build Medalist. You must want victory and like victory to get victory. I'm looking for something almost unattainable. I say, let's dream the so-called impossible dream, let's go to Camelot or Shangri-La. Hey, that's my game. My position in life can't be a fluke, can it? It's been going on too long. ■

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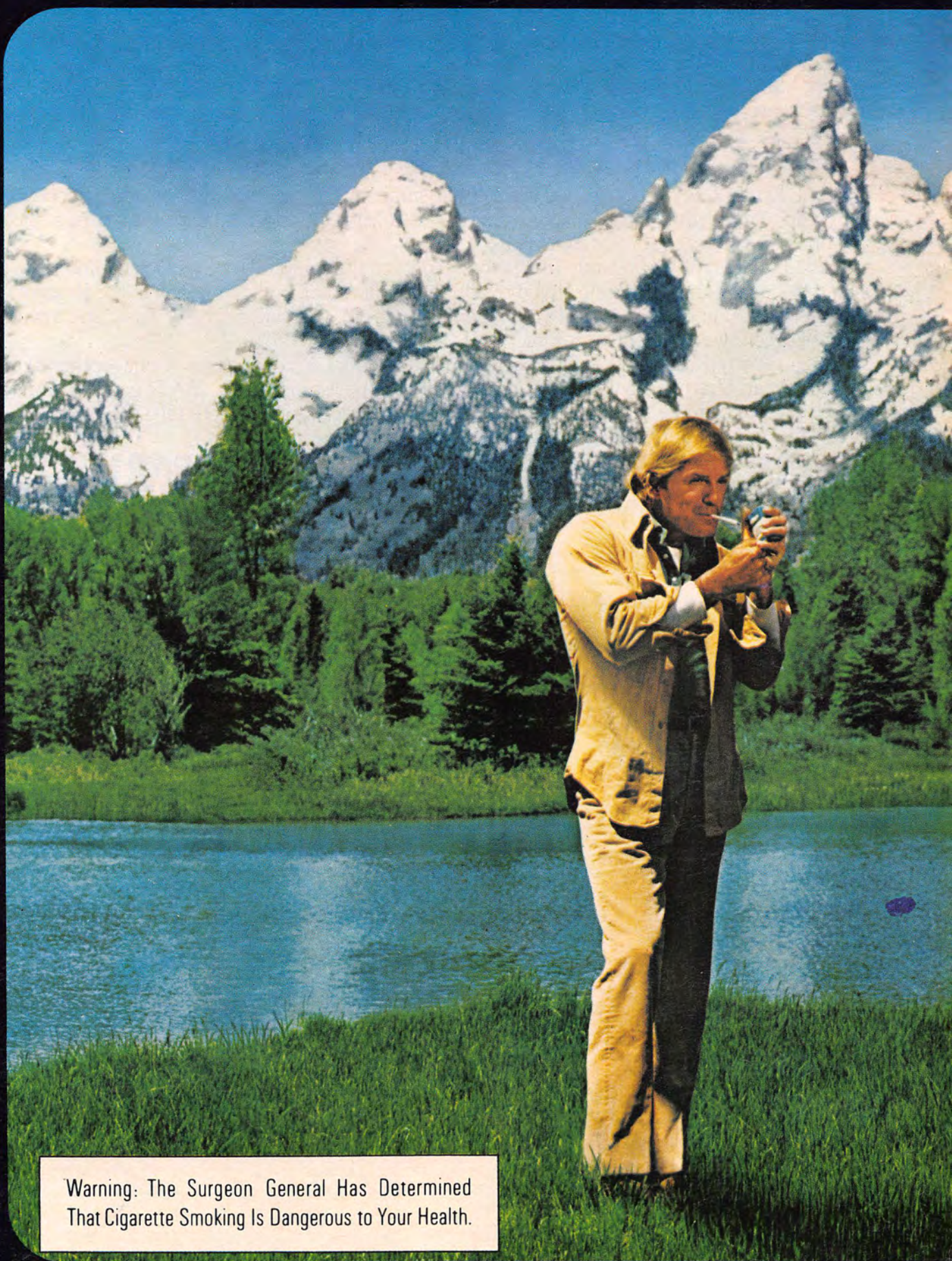
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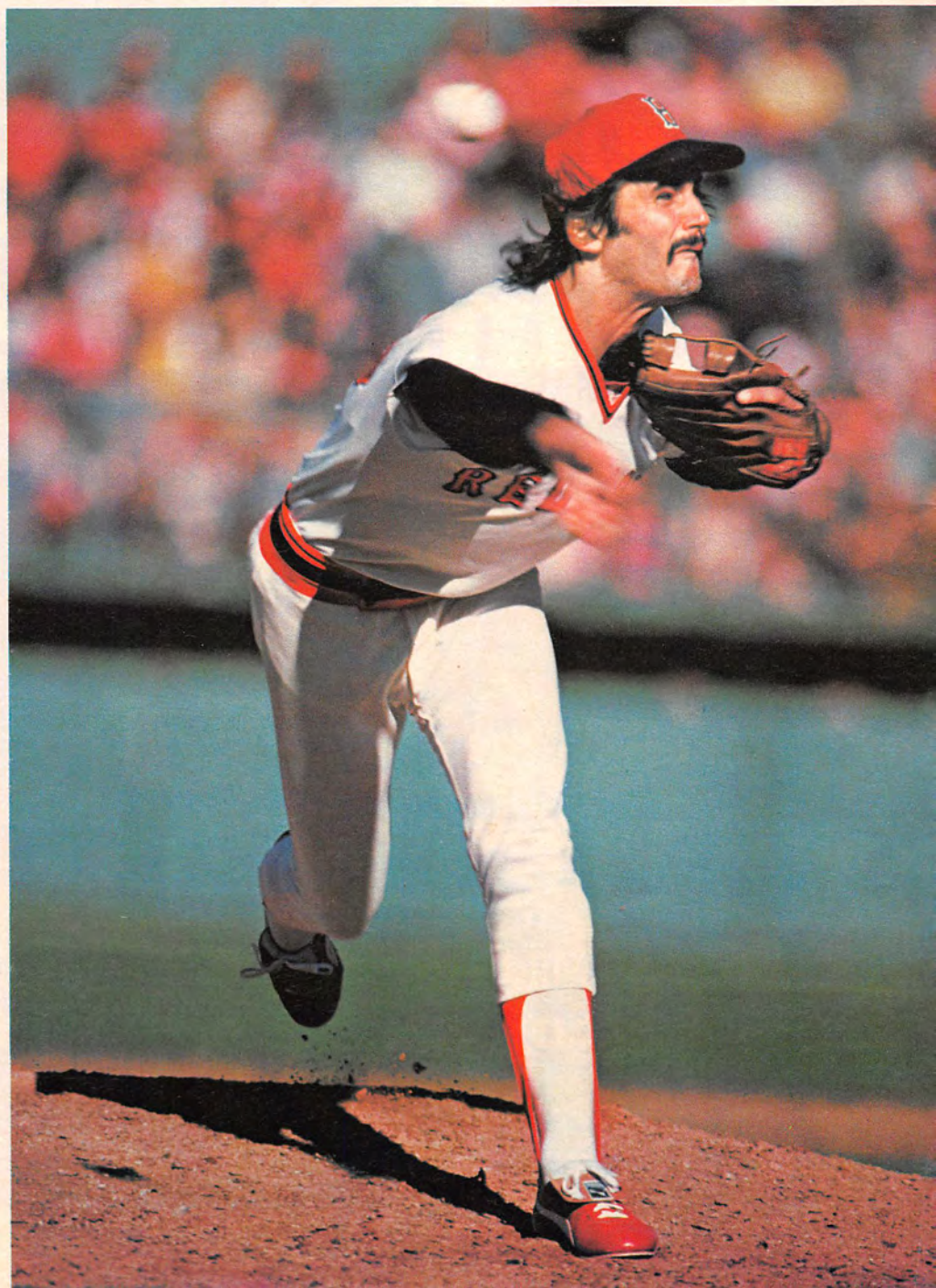
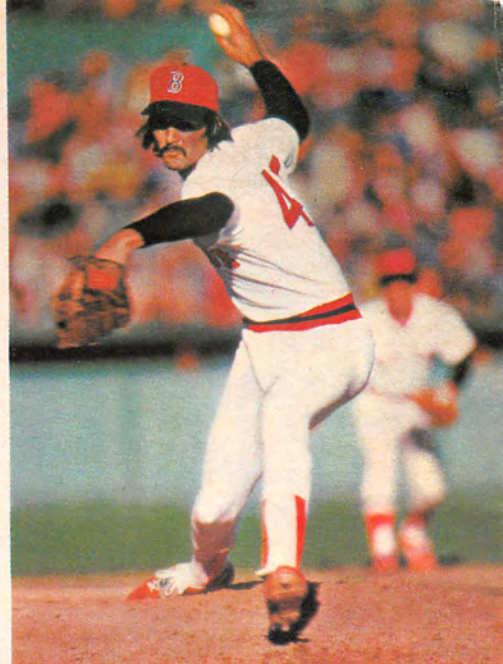
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Despite his "private trauma" last season, Eckersley refined his technique on the mound. "I varied my pitches a lot," says the man with the heavy fastball, "used my slider and curve more—became a smarter pitcher."

Dennis Eckersley's Sweet, Sad Season

Traded to Boston in 1978,
Eck won 20 games for the first time.
But his wife stayed in Cleveland
with his best friend

By HARRY STEIN

September 17, 1978. For the Boston Red Sox, it was the nadir, rock bottom, the pits. Having sat atop the standings of the American League East for nearly five months, the Red Sox had seen their 14-game lead disappear and now they were 3½ games behind the surging Yankees. But that was not the worst of it; the worst was the humiliation, the knowledge that the team's collapse had made it an object of derision throughout the country.

The Yankees. In the Boston clubhouse this afternoon, deep beneath the Yankee Stadium stands, there was little talk of the enemy—the players instead talked quietly about golf and women and *The Tonight Show*—but the subject hung in the air like foul smoke. The Red Sox had lost six straight games to the New Yorkers in ten days, four at home in the notorious "Boston Massacre" (when the Red Sox had been outscored 42-9), and the first two contests of this three-game set.

But not all of the Red Sox were down; sitting on a stool before his locker, dressed only in a jock strap and thongs marked "ECK," Dennis Eckersley, the Boston starter in today's game, was actually smiling.

"Why not?" he asked. "Hell, we're not out of it yet!" And it was apparent that Eckersley meant it.

"Look," he added, "if we beat 'em today—and I intend to—that leaves us only 2½ out with 13 to play. I *know* we can catch 'em." He grinned. "See, I played in Cleveland for three years. I learned how to be optimistic."

Being traded to Boston at the start of this season—for Rick Wise, Mike Paxton and promising rookies Ted Cox and Bo Diaz—had been almost as much of a surprise to Eckersley as to the Cleveland fans; for the previous couple of years he had been the Indians' most impressive starter by far, winning 40 games before

his 23rd birthday. "Afterward, Cleveland started telling people they'd traded me 'cause I was gonna wreck my arm throwing sidearm. That's how they justified it." He smiled. "I guess I showed them, didn't I?"

There was no immodesty in this. Dennis was merely stating an indisputable fact. After a shaky start, he had settled down to become the most consistent man in the Boston rotation, and was in the process of quietly building himself a spectacular year. By that mid-September day, he already had 16 victories, and would end the season with 20, the youngest Boston pitcher to win that many since Boo Ferriss in 1945 and Babe Ruth in 1916.

"Yeah," said Dennis, "it's been a helluva good year professionally." He paused. "But then there's the other thing."

"The other thing" was the fact that immediately after he was traded, the woman he had loved since they attended high school together in Fremont, Cal., and whom he had married at 18, told him that she would not be accompanying him to Boston, that she had become involved with Dennis' best friend, Cleveland centerfielder Rick Manning. Eckersley is a very gentle young man, more subdued than most ballplayers and much more introspective, and the turn of events devastated him. On this September day, almost six months later, he talked about it openly, without rancor, but it was clear that the pain was still vivid.

"You know," he said, suddenly speaking very softly, "when it happened it came as a total shock. Of course, when I thought about it afterward, I knew I should have known better. But it just happened so quick—I was traded, my wife was out the door with my little girl and I'd lost my best friend."

In the months since, slowly, very slowly, Eckersley had begun to deal with it all. "At first," he said, "I thought, 'Oh,

man, I'll never get over it.' But it's healing." He paused. "Just last week, when the club was in Cleveland, I got my divorce. After pitching the previous night, I had to get up early to be in court. I was there with my lawyer, my wife was there with her lawyer. . . ."

"How did you feel about that?"

He shrugged. "Oh, it was a cut-and-dried thing. We'd already talked it out, she and I." He looked down at the floor and the nonchalance evaporated. "I don't know, maybe someday we can get back together. I can hope on that. I still love her." He looked up at me. "But I don't want her back the way she is now. I want her whole."

As it happened, Eckersley was particularly fortunate in having been traded to Boston, not only because the club's status as a contender left him relatively little time to dwell on his own problems, but also because the roster contained several older, thoughtful players, men like Bob Bailey, Fred Kendall and Bill Lee, who were sensitive to a young man's turmoil. Lee especially was a source of solace. "Yeah," said Eckersley, "Space really helped pull me through."

"Well," Lee would acknowledge later, "he came to me as a brother, and that's what I tried to be to him. I told him you can't let yourself get too high when things go good, or too low about your lows. Eck's got a great truth about him, a genuine belief in honesty. I only hope I helped him keep things in perspective."

"One thing that Space told me," Dennis said, "is not to burn all of my bridges, not to lose hope. Maybe the relationship will work out yet." He paused. "That was good to hear."

"Frankly," he was told, "it's probably better to move on, to look for someone else."

"Yeah, he suggested that too," Eckersley admitted without enthusiasm. "But it isn't easy to find someone else."



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Dennis Eckersley

It did not appear that he would have much trouble meeting women. In addition to his enormous professional success, Dennis is blessed with dark, lean good looks.

He smiled. "Sure, I can meet plenty of girls. Just the other day I got a letter from a woman enclosing a photo, and she is a fox. But that's not the kind of thing I'm looking for." He paused and smiled weakly. "I'd better start going to church on Sunday, I guess."

There is something terribly vulnerable about this man, a quality that Bill Lee describes as "a wonderful sweetness."

"How do you feel about Manning?" he was asked. "Aren't you bitter?"

"Bitter?" Eckersley seemed surprised by the word. "Shit, he was my best friend. We signed together at 17. Things happen, that's all. I don't put him down. He's gone through a lot this year, too."

"Did he try to explain or apologize?"

Dennis shook his head. "There's nothing to apologize for. It happened over the course of a seven-year friendship. We were all close, she and him and I, and it just happened. He was like my brother." He shook his head again, more vigorously. "No, I don't put him down for it."

Indeed, about the only one connected with the entire mess toward whom Dennis felt strong resentment was the Boston newsman who wrote, in Eckersley's view, an article implying that in his depression, Eckersley had become disolute, living in a hole of an apartment by day, bar crawling by night. "That was a horseshit article," he said. "That guy made me out to be a maniac, out partyin' all the time, never gettin' any sleep, not comin' to the ballpark ready. Is he crazy or what?"

Dennis' record stands as proof of exactly how seriously he takes his work. Indeed, he insisted that his private trauma had served to make him a better ballplayer, had given him an incentive to succeed he'd never known before. "I'm always thinking of my little girl Mande," he said quietly, unembarrassed by the fact that it might have come across as corny. "She's two and a half. I saw her a few days ago in Cleveland. She's talking now, but only we, my wife and I—I mean my ex-wife and I—understand her." He coughed, the residue of a fading cold. "That's what helps me prepare myself before a game, thinking about her. That's what makes me go."

"Hey, Eck, what's happenin'?"

Dennis looked up at a young man wearing wire-rimmed glasses, Joe D'Ambrosio of the Yankee public relations department. "I'm doing okay," he responded, "except that the goddamn Yankees are killing us."

D'Ambrosio shook his head in mock sympathy. "Yeah." He paused. "So how's it goin'?"

"Well," said Dennis, "I just got my divorce a few days ago."

D'Ambrosio turned to a guy with Eckersley. "You know, Eck was one of the only ballplayers around who was really faithful to his woman."

"Well," Eckersley said, "that's the way it is."

"But you're feelin' good, right?" asked D'Ambrosio.

"Oh yeah, apart from this damn cold, I'm in great shape. My weight's good. I've been eatin' out a lot." He smiled weakly. "Before I used to laze around the house all the time. At least I don't do that anymore."

When D'Ambrosio left, it was just an hour and a half till game time. Dennis began to dress. In silence, he put on his socks and shirt, then pulled on his pants and his cleats. "You know," he said abruptly, "I'm pretty fortunate. I make \$150,000 a year. I mean, things like this also happen to guys who drive a cab. And

Bill Lee: "He came to me as a brother, and that's what I tried to be to him"

I've got a job I really love. In high school I also played some football—quarterback—but I could never get used to the hitting. It wasn't me. But baseball, man, I love it."

He stood up, and there was a sudden glaze in his eyes. He had shifted gears, no longer thinking about his troubles but about the job he had to do. "I mean, we just gotta start winning this damn thing." He put on his hat. "Well, it's on me. We win today and that perks us up, gets us moving. We're not dead yet."

It was a glorious afternoon, crystal clear, temperatures in the 60s. For the huge Yankee Stadium crowd, it was an ideal setting to watch the final nails being pounded into the Red Sox' coffin. "THE BOSTON MASSACRE (Part 2)" read a banner hanging behind third base. "THE SOX HAVE UNRAVELED," noted another. Even the Boston reporters, whose copy for the hometown readers had continued to reflect a dogged optimism, appeared close to despair. Before the game, a gaggle of them sat around a table in the writers' lounge over chocolate pudding and rectangles of orange jello and tried to agree on who deserved the most blame for the collapse—manager Don Zimmer, the slumping first baseman George Scott,

or a front office that had failed to provide the team with an adequate bench.

Eckersley, warming up in the bullpen beyond the centerfield fence, was oblivious to all of this. "Before a game," he says, "man, I'm just concentratin' on my job. I don't worry about all the explanations or excuses. Let the press worry about that. It's their job. Worryin' about it would interfere with my job."

To Dennis, concentration is the key to successful pitching. "A lot of guys got great stuff here," he had said earlier, tapping his right arm, "but so much of it is in the head." He was still annoyed with himself over the fact that during the Yankee series in Boston, he had allowed himself to be rattled by a two-out bloop double and gotten knocked out of the game.

But today, it quickly became apparent, was to be a very different story. Eckersley was tested immediately; in the first inning, third baseman Butch Hobson booted a Thurman Munson grounder—exactly the kind of play that had sandbagged the Red Sox over the past month. But Dennis, bearing down, induced Reggie Jackson to fly out, escaping damage, and from there on in, he was in complete control, utterly unflappable.

Eckersley is what Bill Lee calls a "rock 'n' roll" pitcher. He is full of nervous energy on the mound, moving to some private rhythm beating inside his head, and his pitching motion is as flamboyant as his off-the-field personality is muted. Moving deliberately into his windup, he kicks high and around, lists slightly toward third base, then whips the ball three-quarters sidearm, so that it seems to be exploding toward the batter from the third base stands.

But the motion can be deceptive; in 1978 Eckersley learned to alternate speeds so effectively that, when he is on, hitters are often off stride. That afternoon he had the aggressive Yankee batters continually lunging at his off-speed stuff, popping up and dribbling weakly to the infield. Then, when they sat back waiting for his breaking ball, he fired his live fastball by them.

Eckersley has had that fastball since high school. Back then, he says, he was "awesome—everyone was awesome in high school—" and it was his velocity that drew the major-league scouts. As a kid from the San Francisco area, he had hoped to be signed by the Giants, but "the day Carl Hubbell, their head scout, came to see me pitch, I really took gas. They belted me all over the place."

Cleveland, in desperate need of front-line pitching, signed him. Eckersley moved up quickly, making the majors in 1975, at age 20, on the strength of a fastball that had been averaging a strikeout per inning.

He was an instant success, winning 13 of 20 decisions that first year, a win total

he equaled in '76 striking out 200 batters.

But Eckersley had problems in Cleveland with his manager, Frank Robinson. "He made pitchers nervous out there," says Dennis. "You knew that if you walked a guy in the ninth inning you'd be gone, even if you had a three-run lead. You thought about it so much, you usually *did* walk him." Then, too, pitching coach Harvey Haddix was always tampering with Eckersley's pitching motion, trying to get him to throw overhand. But Eckersley refused to change, saying, "I've always thrown this way. I'm sure as hell not gonna risk injurin' my arm by foolin' around with it." After a 14-13 mark in 1977—in which he pitched a no-hitter and two one-hitters—he was traded to the Red Sox.

He has found the professional atmosphere in Boston much more to his liking. Manager Don Zimmer and pitching coach Al Jackson let him adjust to his new club—and to tiny Fenway Park—at his own speed, and he has done so magnificently. "I knew I couldn't get away with using the fastball in Fenway as much as I had in Municipal Stadium," he says. "No way." So, over the course of the '78 season, despite the immense burden of his personal problems, a burden which might have proved debilitating for another man, Dennis Lee Eckersley breathed life into an ancient cliché—he has become a pitcher instead of a thrower.

That was more evident than ever on that Sunday afternoon in Yankee Stadium as, inning after inning, Eckersley deftly held the powerful New Yorkers at bay. Meanwhile, as if inspired by his example, his teammates began playing better baseball than they had in weeks; they advanced runners, they drove in runs with two men out, they moved the ball crisply around the infield. Simple things,

to be sure, but the kinds of things that for most of that awful autumn the Red Sox seemed to have forgotten.

By the seventh inning, with his team leading 3-0, Eckersley, pitching on three days' rest, began to tire; with two outs he gave up a run-scoring single, and Zimmer replaced him with relief ace Bob Stanley, who then preserved the 7-3 victory. Eckersley's statistics over 6⅓ innings: one run, three hits and, perhaps most tellingly, only four strikeouts. "Hey," joked a New York sportswriter in the crowded press box as Eckersley left the mound to grudging applause, "have you ever heard of a team blowing a 14-game lead, falling 3½ back, then coming back to win it?"

But, in fact, the game did mark a turning point for the Red Sox. Suddenly, incredibly, they were once again the juggernaut they had been in May and June. And among a resurrected pitching staff, it was Eckersley who was most impressive. He won his next start, and the one after that, and abruptly, with a week left to go in the season, the Red Sox were trailing the Yankees by a single game with six remaining for each team.

But then the agony began; the Red Sox won the first five, but so did the Yankees. Dennis pitched that fifth Boston victory, a 5-1 dazzler over Toronto for his 20th win, but what under other circumstances would have been a jubilant postgame lockerroom was painfully silent; surely, agonizingly, the pennant was slipping away (as it did in the playoff against the Yankees a few days later) and there was nothing the Red Sox could do about it.

The reporters surrounding Dennis Eckersley seemed to sense that, with a revitalized Catfish Hunter set to pitch the clincher for the Yankees the next day, even Eck had at last given up hope, and the interview session after the win over To-

ronto had all the gusto of an internment. Eckersley, his black hair matted, his baseball pants smudged, his yellow T-shirt damp with perspiration, answered all the questions dutifully, but without even the pretense of enthusiasm.

"Well, Dennis," began a reporter for a local paper, "20 victories. . . ."

Eckersley nodded distractedly. "Yeah."

"Well, how does it feel?"

He managed a smile. "It feels good, real good."

"Dennis," chimed in someone else, "what was the difference this year? What suddenly made you a 20-game winner?"

"Well," he responded, "I've varied my pitches a lot this year, used my slider and curve more, become a smarter pitcher. And my control has gotten real sharp. That means a lot"—he looked directly at the reporter—"that and getting all those 5-0 leads."

There was a long silence. "Dennis," a reporter at the outer edge of the throng called finally, "what does this mean to you at this moment, winning 20 games?"

That question hit a nerve, touched off something the reporter probably didn't intend and certainly didn't understand. Suddenly Dennis Eckersley's eyes, vacant just a moment before, went moist. "This is all I could ask for," he said, his voice even softer than before, "especially after all the things that've happened to me this year. A lot of personal things have happened to me." He paused. "I feel like cryin', to tell you the truth." He stopped again, just for a moment. "This one was for my little girl, Mandee."

There was an awkward silence.

"How old is she, Dennis?" someone asked finally.

"Two and a half."

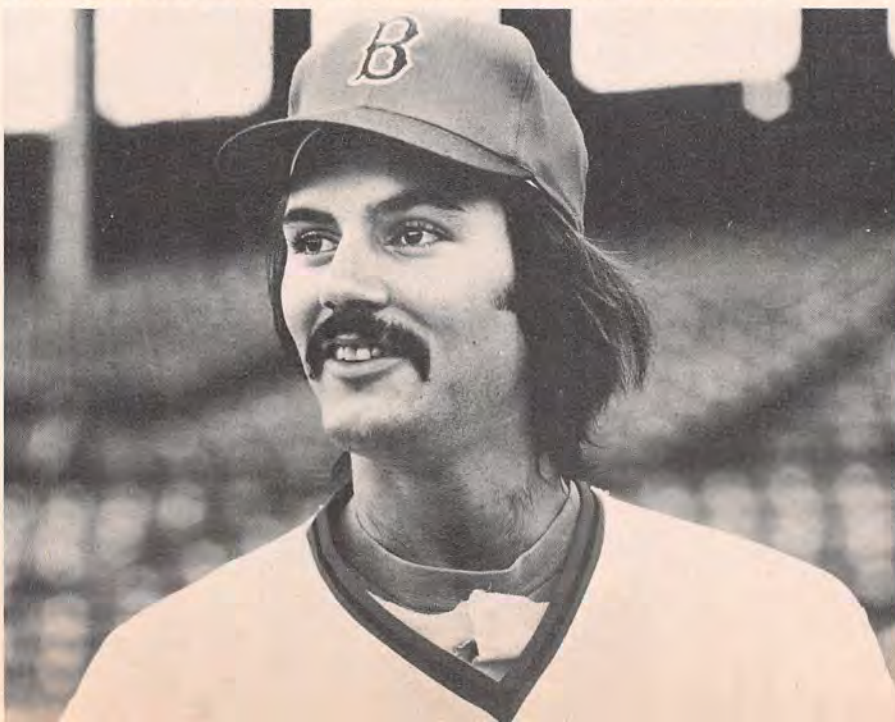
Ten minutes later, when the last question had been asked and answered, Dennis wandered to the center of the clubhouse and simply stood there, staring straight ahead. A writer walked up to him, and sensing that he was intruding, said, "You seem really subdued, as if you don't want to be with people at all."

He nodded. "I was just thinkin' how lucky I was that this whole mess happened during the season. At least this way I had something to keep my mind on. But the off-season"—he gave an involuntary shudder—"that's gonna be rough, man."

"What do you plan to do?"

He shrugged. "Travel, see friends, try and keep busy." He turned, glancing toward the back of the room. Then he said, "This thing today, this winning 20 games is so satisfying. I only wish there were someone I could share it with." He hesitated. "You know, my birthday is coming up Tuesday [October 3]. I'll be 24." He paused again, this time for a full ten seconds, then exhaled deeply. "I just wish things were different, that's all. But they're not." ■

His 20th win was "All I could ask for," says Eck. "It was for my little girl."





The NBA's Horrendous On-the-Road Show

On a typical trip that covered 7,000 miles in nine days, the Houston Rockets survived one blizzard, several detours, four losses in six games and extreme fatigue. The NBA schedule, the author reports, has "rigged" the game in favor of the home team

By LEWIS COLE

Four hours before the game, the Houston Rockets finally arrive in Portland. They enter the motel and gather around Dick Vandervoort, their trainer and traveling secretary, towering over him as he assigns their separate rooms. Then they trek off, one by one, following the bellboys who carry their bags. Rockets coach Tom Nissalke yawns and looks distraught. "Make arrangements for tomorrow, Dick," he tells Vandervoort. The team should have gotten here three hours earlier, taking a flight from Phoenix—where they lost by seven points last night—but fog had closed the Portland airport and forced the team to land in Seattle and bus the 172 miles to Portland. Tomorrow night the Rockets must play back in Seattle, and Nissalke and Vandervoort want to make sure the

unpredictable weather doesn't delay them again; they'll hire another bus rather than risk flying because the National Basketball Association levies a \$25,000 fine against any team that fails to appear for a game without an ironclad excuse.

In the motel coffee shop, Tom Nissalke studies the menu with vague dissatisfaction. When he orders his food, his mildly ironic drawl sounds so much like Jack Nicholson's in *Five Easy Pieces* that I expect him to tell the waitress to hold a chicken-salad sandwich between her knees. "Where would you say your team is going?" I ask, referring to the club's prospects for the season. Nissalke, a pro coach for ten years, says frankly: "I would say I don't know where this team is going."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT KINGSBURY/FOCUS PRODUCTIONS



On the road

For the next 20 minutes, Nissalke discusses his team's troubles. Last spring, the Rockets signed Rick Barry as a free agent and lost John Lucas as compensation. Barry has attracted fans, but the club doesn't have a playmaking guard to replace Lucas and it has slumped to a .500 mark after winning five of its first six games this season. The Rockets also need a strong forward to help center Moses Malone set up the team's inside game, freeing its superb outside shooters, Calvin Murphy, Rudy Tomjanovich and Mike Newlin, to take their shots. Although Barry thinks he should be passing more, Nissalke wants him to score more. Nissalke has started juggling the lineup and eventually he hopes to play Barry some at guard, but the schedule allows him little time to experiment. On this road trip in late November and early December the Rockets must play six games in nine nights in front of hostile crowds, travel some 7,000 miles on seven different planes—changing time zones and climates five times (how do you pack one bag for tropical, temperate and winter

weather?)—sleep in seven different motel rooms. And they've already suffered one loss, one delay and one injury—Tomjanovich sprained his back in Phoenix and won't rejoin the club until tomorrow. With a little more bad luck, they could return to Houston five games under .500.

"The turnovers are really hurting you, aren't they?" I ask as the waitress brings Nissalke's onion soup and steak sandwich. "Turnovers?" he repeats ruefully and looks across the table at Del Harris, his assistant coach. "Yeah, I would say we have a—what's the word, Del?—*proclivity* in that direction." Harris laughs. "That's the word." It's gallows humor. If the team loses all six games on this road trip, it would take a miracle to make the playoffs, and Nissalke knows it. "Jesus," he says, "you wanted a road trip? Well, you've got a good start."

Winning on the road has always been difficult in the NBA, and the reasons range from mental to physical to financial. Mentally, visiting players are at a disadvantage because hometown crowds can consciously inspire their players with cheers and subconsciously intimidate referees with jeers. Physically, the visitors are tired from travel. And financially, the

league allows the home team to keep 93 percent of the gate receipts (the remaining seven percent goes to the league office). Thus, the more the home team wins, the more it makes because people come out to support winners. Strong home-team records, therefore, are necessary for the league's success.

Still, in the past, teams often won 40 percent of their road games, and just five years ago, six of the 17 NBA teams had winning road records. But in the last four seasons, the road has changed from a challenge to a nightmare. Home teams have won two out of every three games, and during the last two seasons only one team, the Portland Trail Blazers last season, has managed a winning road record. Early this season, the NBA champion Washington Bullets lost four straight on a West Coast swing. The road no longer seems to try teams—it executes them.

The key factor in this dramatic change has been the schedule. Before the league expanded in 1976 to include the four remaining American Basketball Association clubs, the NBA teams played their division rivals six or seven times, their conference opponents five times and the teams in the other conference four times. Now all NBA teams play each other four

On one of their frequent bus rides to and from airports, some of the Rockets—(L-R) Moses Malone, Alonzo Bradley, Slick Watts and Dwight Jones—read or listened to music. "People imagine it's great being on the road," Slick says, "but it isn't."



A man with a mustache, wearing a light blue cowboy hat, a red long-sleeved shirt, and a brown vest, is leaning against a rustic wooden fence. He is holding a lit cigarette in his mouth and has a lasso coiled around his arm. The background is a dark, textured wooden wall.

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On the road

times (two teams are played only three times)—the only equalized schedule in pro sports.

This new schedule forces teams to travel far too much—adding at least four trips to the already frantic older schedule—and exhausted players cannot perform well. A team on the road must spend so much time in transit from one arena to the next, and the players must expend so much energy trying to maintain their mental, emotional and physical well-being, that the rested and relaxed home team enjoys a decided advantage.

Before the Portland game, coach Jack Ramsay tells me: "There are too many games now in too few nights. But that's not going to change; that's the NBA. You just need a great team to win on the road. You must have a team with veterans, and you need a deep team that can withstand injuries and has mental toughness and concentration."

In general, the schedule seems to favor West Coast teams. Traveling west to east you gain time, you don't lose it, so that an 8:30 game in New York is really 5:30 for a Seattle Supersonics, while an 8:00 game in the Kingdome starts at 11:00 for a Knick.

The Trail Blazers' extraordinary success at home (71 victories and only 11 defeats in the last two full seasons) is partially due to their extraordinary fans. They attend midday practices regularly and fill Memorial Coliseum a full hour before game time. Then, throughout every game, the fans are like a sixth man on the court, verbally abusing and distracting visiting players, intimidating referees and cheering their beloved Blazers on to greater heights.

Tonight, the public-address man omits E.C. Coleman's name while introducing the Rockets' players. "E.C.! E.C.!" Nissalke shouts and quietly curses the announcer. Coleman (who a month later was named an assistant coach) hesitates on the bench, not knowing whether to stand up or remain seated. By the time the announcer corrects himself, the other Rockets are already trotting off the court and the crowd is laughing. "That's bullshit!" exclaims Barry, waving an arm disgustedly toward the announcer, and the crowd taunts Barry—the man they love to hate. "Shut up, traitor!" a fan yells. Barry glares back, his pupils two black pinheads of rage and contempt, and the crowd hoots gleefully. "Let's see what you've got besides a hair out of place!" one fan shouts, the first of the innumerable references to Barry's hair-weave.

The game begins and the referee immediately calls Calvin Murphy on a charging foul. "Shit!" Calvin exclaims. He gets up off the floor, his face a squint of exas-

peration and anger, and the fans needle him: "Bitch, Calvin, bitch!" Four minutes later, Calvin is called for charging again and he stares hard at Nissalke: "You see what they're doing to me, taking away my game."

Aided by good outside shooting, the Rockets take a small lead. Then Murphy is called yet again for charging. He goes to the bench and soon is shouting to his replacement, Mike Newlin, "Shoot it, Mike, shoot it!" Murphy's is the only encouraging voice in the arena. Nissalke stands to call a play and Portland fans behind the Rocket bench scream, "Sit down, Coach! You're way ahead." Nissalke sits and then squirms in his chair, his chin sunk into his hand. "Jesus, that's no pass," he mutters as Barry loses the ball. Portland ties the score, and as the Houston guards walk the ball up the floor, Nissalke shouts to Barry, "Shoot it, shoot it!" Barry calls back, "I had no shot."

For the rest of the game, Houston's parts don't fit together. Newlin complains that Malone can't score against Portland center Tom Owens, and without getting his share of shots, Malone doesn't rebound; Barry continues to pass—he takes only five shots the entire first half—and without Tomjanovich the team lacks another scoring forward. Midway

through the third quarter, Murphy gets hot and narrows the Portland lead to seven. He steals the ball and just as assistant coach Harris cries, "Way to hustle, Calvin!" referee Lee Jones blows his whistle and announces the foul. Murphy stretches every muscle in his face, grimacing at this latest injustice. "That's bull!" he explodes, "expletive bull!" The referee forms the T with his hands and Harris calls out to the referee: "Lee, Lee, in Texas that's not a dirty word."

But the referees don't have much of a sense of humor. The crowd has been on them from the start—fans in the front rows jumped onto the court protesting calls—and the officials have botched several calls in Portland's favor.

The Rockets lose by 22 points, and the Portland fans deserve credit for at least a few of them.

The next morning, preparing to check out, the players start entering the motel lobby at 8:30. A thin-faced girl with a chalky pallor walks in front of some bell-boys pushing a rack of piled-up Converse bags. They eye her, but she appears more pathetic than sexy. Robert Reid, at 23 one of the youngest Rockets, stands at the cashier's desk, a batch of letters and postcards in his hand. Harris walks over and says, "You shaved this morning, Robert.

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On the road

I can smell it."

Reid laughs. "Now I don't have to for the next three days."

We board the bus, a large, comfortable Greyhound, for the three-hour trip to Seattle. Nissalke, Harris, Vandervoort and Gene Peterson, the team's announcer, sit in the front two rows. The writers settle behind them, followed by Mike Dunleavy, Newlin and Barry, and the black players sit in back. Only management has reserved seats; the rest sit according to their likes and punctuality. The wakeup call this morning came only 30 minutes before the bus's departure time, and the players rushed through rolls and orange juice before boarding. Time is a rubber band on the road, stretching itself out over wasted hours and suddenly snapping shut. Everything you do centers around the game, and no pause is allowed to disturb the schedule. The game itself lasts only two hours, yet the major part of each day is spent waiting for it to start.

As the bus rolls northward on the highway past fog-filled bogs, a couple of voices in the back say:

"You ready to get whipped tonight?"

"Naw. We won't get whipped tonight."

"We'll get whipped if you keep on

dancing all over the court."

"I'm not dancing."

"You sure are. Every time you get the ball you take three steps and go into your Fred Astaire."

Other players sleep, each sprawled over two seats. In the front, the coaches and trainer trade papers. The travelers are a literate crew, reading books by Sidney Sheldon, William Buckley and Edmund Wilson, a book on investigative journalism and a ragman's pile of newspapers. Dwight Jones and Dunleavy play backgammon, and Newlin helps Houston sportswriter George White fill in a crossword puzzle. Occasionally, one of them shouts out an obscure clue and three times in a row Barry, sitting behind them, immediately comes up with the correct answer. For 45 minutes, the three create a chorus of clues, answers, jokes and comments.

After they stop, the only sound inside the bus for an hour is the gliding baritone of the Houston radio announcer dubbing his tapes for tonight's show. As we approach Seattle, the players rouse themselves from their daydreams, and soon their banter creates a verbal fugue:

"There's a new western league. They've got a great schedule. Tripleheaders every night. The season lasts six weeks."

"Really?"

"No, but if you're paying her then you lose on the taxes."

"But I'm paying her less."

"Except on Christmas; then they play marathons."

"L.A. got beat last night; Philly, too."

"Hey, you guys can fool about that league, but I used to play there. It was serious for me."

"Hell, I would speak to my accountant about that."

"Pop that L.A. bubble. But you'll see, Philly will win five more now."

"San Antonio beat the Nets and they got only 9,000."

"That right? How much does the Hemis Fair hold? Sixteen?"

"She's got good jugs."

"Yeah, but she smokes. God, I hate a woman who smokes. They taste like someone stuck some burnt socks in their mouth."

"God, I love to play basketball."

"It's better when you win."

"You know what I'd do if I were a general manager?"

"What would you do?"

"I'd ship your black ass out of here."

Before tonight's game, Lenny Wilkens, the Seattle Supersonics coach, repeats Ramsay's praise of the schedule. In the game itself, the teams trade baskets through the first half. Then the Rockets shoot 80 percent in the third quarter and hold off the Sonics throughout the fourth as Robert Reid starts dancing in front of the Rockets' bench, celebrating their first victory on the trip. Afterward, Nissalke credits the win to Slick Watts. Nissalke started Slick here, hoping his return to his old hometown would inspire Slick to play well, and the gamble has worked. The Rockets have cut their turnovers almost in half.

After the game, Seattle coach Lenny Wilkens is asked why his team lost. He replies that his players were exhausted, having just traveled back and forth to Denver for a home-and-away series with the Nuggets.

"The worst thing about the schedule is that it doesn't let you get ready for teams," Nissalke says. But the Rockets get a break on the road in Oakland on Monday: Their game with the Warriors isn't until Wednesday night, which means they have two days to practice and rest. Newlin immediately calls room service and sends out his laundry—"I always make sure I have enough pairs of socks when we play consecutive games so that I don't have to wash them." Murphy goes shopping, saying, "When I come home, my kids don't care where I've been—only what I've brought."

That evening, while the Rockets split off to movies and other diversions, several players dine with John Lucas, their ex-teammate. "Hey hey, Coach," Lucas greets Nissalke as their cars pass at the motel entrance, "we're going to whip you

Longtime road roommates, guard Calvin Murphy and forward Rudy Tomjanovich, caught up on sleep during one of the team's plane flights.



bad!" Nissalke laughs.

The next morning, Nissalke has nothing to smile about before the team's first practice of the trip. Nissalke and Harris have designed the practice for Slick Watts, whom they've decided to try as the point guard after Slick's fine performance in Seattle. The only trouble is that they let Slick stay overnight in his hometown to visit with his wife and kids, and he has just called to say that his plane to Oakland has been rerouted; he can't arrive until tomorrow, so the practice cannot be that effective. "I've decided what I'll do about Slick missing practice," Nissalke says. "Instead of fining him, I'll have him take the team out to dinner."

That afternoon and the next day I get several views of the major problem for NBA players on an extended road trip—how do they relax when the game and its demands, both on and off the court, are ever present?

Calvin Murphy spends Tuesday afternoon lying around his room in red terry-cloth shorts; many pairs of socks dot the floor, and a televised cartoon show serves as background as he speaks. "Travel has always been the same," he says. "The trick is not to burn the candle at both ends. You can't be out screwing until 3 or 4 in the morning. When Rudy [Tomjanovich, his roommate] and I first joined the Rockets, we had an understanding between us. Up to 2 a.m. before a game was our time; after that it was Rocket time. And you can't deviate at all because this is a business. You take me—nobody needs a 5-foot-9 troublemaker and I'm not going to be one, so I don't deviate at all. Even in New York. My momma lives there and she'll want me to come over. I do, but I tell her it's just to see her, don't be inviting the whole rest of the family because no matter how much I love them I can't get all involved in a big family scene."

The phone rings and Murphy picks up the receiver: "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. All right." He hangs up. An old friend arranging to see him. He starts to speak, but the phone rings again and when he picks it up the line goes dead. The mystery repeats itself four times. On the next ring, Calvin pounces and yells, "Hey, man, you got a damn problem or something?" He slams down the receiver. "Just a freak," he explains coolly, and calls the operator, instructing her to hold all calls. "That happens a lot; they find you by accident and keep calling." He gets up to close the window. "Hey, look at Coach," he says, pointing to Nissalke jogging around the motel parking lot. "Hey, Coach!" he shouts, imitating a radio announcer: "And they're coming around the final lap, it's Nissalke leading by a hair!"

Tomjanovich and Dunleavy come in. Rudy lies on a bed, dwarfing it. The trip has aggravated his back injury, and so far

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none of the home teams have the Nautilus machine he uses for therapy. You'd think the league would require all teams to have certain medical equipment for the NBA's prime asset—its players—but it does not. Tomjanovich and Dunleavy begin a backgammon game, and Murphy protests when they use his board.

"Shut up, Murphy," Tomjanovich says, smiling. "There are two of us white boys here; you're outnumbered."

Murphy heads for the shower and, halfway to the bathroom, points to a pile of Tomjanovich's clothes on the floor. "Rudy," he complains in a mock petulant voice, "could you please put this stuff in the bathroom?" Tomjanovich, losing badly to Dunleavy, says, "Who are you, Suzy Superclean? You're just saying that because there's a reporter here." Do they mind reporters? "Ah, some always try to make trouble," Rudy tells me, his voice scratchily husky. "One of them hung around with Calvin and me and we were fooling around, you know, just like we were doing before, calling each other white boy and black boy. Anyway, this guy tries to make it like there's all this racial tension between us." Murphy complains about a *Sports Illustrated* article in which he was featured as an "enforcer." "They lied to me," Calvin says. "That picture they used of me scowling they

said was just for fun." Can I quote him? "Yeah, you can quote me." He heads for the shower and lifts the seat of his shorts with a finger, revealing one cheek. "You can tell them I moon them."

At Wednesday's practice, Slick Watts executes the plays and Nissalke is pleased. But the player with the most pressure on him is Rick Barry, who is making his first return appearance to Oakland. Tonight, he will enact one of the regular dramas of road trips: The hero returning to the scene of his past and greatest triumphs. Will the fans boo or cheer him? Do they think he sold out Oakland or that the Warriors betrayed him? Has John Lucas already replaced Barry in the affections of the fans? The press makes front-page headlines out of the questions that attend Barry's return.

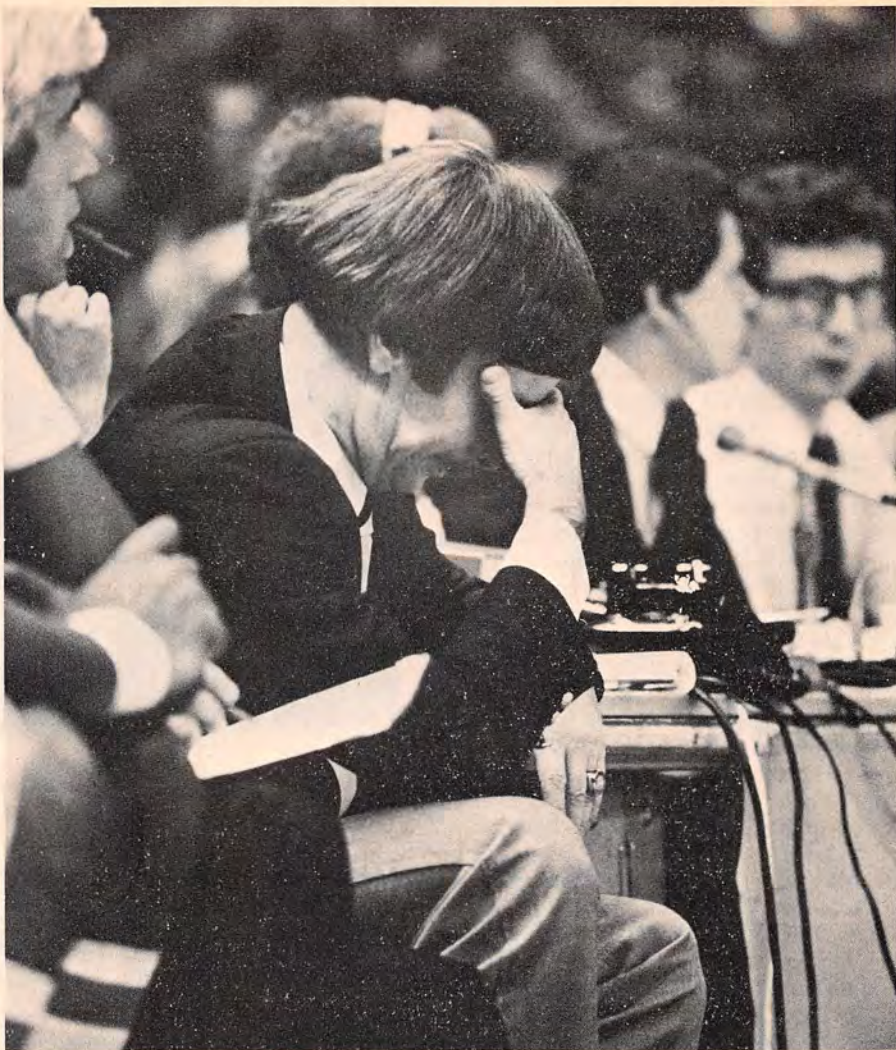
But Barry remains entirely calm. He merely goes about his affairs—arranging to dine with Cliff Ray after the game, speaking at a high school, taking care of some business affairs. Although tonight he will be the inspiration and despair of 13,000 people, he focuses all his attention on his performance at practice, exhibiting the "mental discipline" players insist you must cultivate to survive in the NBA. During practice, Del Harris kids Barry about his ability to block shots. "Yeah," challenges Barry, "check the stats. I'm

On the road

second on this team with blocked shots." And the next three times he plays defense, he stuffs his man. When E.C. Coleman finally gets off a shot against him, he teases Barry: "Block that one, man." Barry looks at the ball bouncing off the rim. "Don't have to," he answers. The only hint that he is nervous occurs when he practices his foul shots. The greatest foul shooter in history misses four in a row. Newlin stands nearby, observing Barry's tosses. "Your arms," Newlin finally suggests cautiously, not wanting to seem presumptuous, "you're not extending them fully. Let them hang lower." He adjusts Barry's arms, straightening his elbows, letting the ball hang between his hands in its normal position, near Barry's knees. "Now try it," Newlin says. The ball makes a perfect arc and fills the net. "You're right," Barry says, a little perplexed at his sudden failing. Then he resumes his famous stance, taking a full seven seconds before releasing the ball, his face becoming the mask of concentration fans love to heckle, just as though the arena were full and the shots were going to determine the game.

Economical and precise, Barry's foul shooting is the perfect preview of his performance that night, an artlessly artful show in which he betrays no emotion, even when the crowd gives him a standing ovation. Barry's demeanor is a startling contrast to John Lucas, an exuberant showman who leads his team to victory while lifting his fists towards the stands, encouraging the fans to cheer. After Lucas sinks a jumper that clinches the game, he trots backward downcourt, his hand frozen in the shooting position as though he were waving goodbye to his opponents. But Barry's performance is not over when the game ends. Afterward, in the lockerroom, some 40 journalists crowd around him and ask questions and then more questions. The session lasts an hour and 14 minutes. Later, Barry tells me he didn't mind it at all. "They're just professionals doing their job and I'm doing mine."

Slick Watts had not been sharp in his point guard performance that night; he will need time to adjust his running-game style to the patterned offense the slow Rockets play. After the game, I attend a party given for Slick by some old friends. En route, he speaks about women on the road. Although the younger Rockets pursue women constantly, the veterans seem more discrete. "Well, you've got to be careful with ladies," Slick told me. "You never know what they might do. I know ladies, classy ladies, but when I'm in Chicago or Detroit, I just stay in my hotel behind those chairs and doors. You want



Tom Nissalke's expression during the Chicago loss characterized the entire trip.

to see me, *you* come on over. My territory. When you're younger, it's different. You imagine these perfect setups: classy lady, a good night after a great game, no hassles. But how often does that dream actually happen? Maybe once or twice a season. Most of the time, the lady isn't classy and you've played not worth a damn and you don't know just what you're getting into. People imagine it's great being on the road, but it isn't. Of course, the worst thing isn't the road; it's being traded. You go home after three months, and you're so foreign to your wife you don't even feel like touching her. You just play with your kids by the fire, throwing them up in the air."

At the party, Slick plays some backgammon, but he's preoccupied with basketball. Players normally love to talk basketball, but on the road there is no relief from the game and they worry obsessively about their problems with it. "You see," Slick starts as soon as I walk over to him, "you see how they won't let me run. They want a slowdown game. With some of these coaches, you can serve tea and crackers while you bring the ball upcourt. But if that's what they want, then I'll give

it to them." His host passes and asks, "Having a good time, Slick?" Slick thanks his host sincerely and says, "This is just what I needed to take my mind off the game. You know, relax."

Tonight's game in San Diego is a "must" win for the Rockets. They are 1-3 on this trip, and unless they win here they will have to beat the Bulls in Chicago, two nights hence, to come home with a decent record. San Diego is the league's newest team—a mishmash of talented, troubled players—whose offense consists of guards Randy Smith and Lloyd Free.

The Rockets key their defense on the two Clipper guards, and the Rocket marksmen consistently hit their shots—especially Calvin Murphy, who goes 13 for 16—and the game quickly becomes a smorgasbord of individual performances and sideshows. Barry misses a free throw and Murphy, close behind him in foul-shooting percentage, smiles. Then Calvin walks to the line and misses his first foul shot, blowing a rare opportunity to gain a percentage point. Barry and Randy Smith get into a shoving match. "You're stupid," Barry tells him. "You want to play

the \$10,000 fine? That's stupid." A fan heckles Barry: "Comb it forward, Barry, comb it forward." The fan is sitting only a few feet away as Barry inbounds the ball and Rick finally answers him: "It's all mine, asshole."

The poise of the Rocket veterans carries them to an impressive 113-104 victory, but who ever doubted this team could shoot well in a free-for-all? They still don't have a settled backcourt and Malone has played erratically. Dwight Jones spelling him for more than half the game. Barry collects 27 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, but Tomjanovich hasn't been effective, and this is only partly due to his aggravated injury. These two talents just don't seem to complement each other. But Nissalke is happy: "We're all right—now we can't end up worse than 2-4."

The next day is a nightmare. We are supposed to leave San Diego at 9:30 p.m. and arrive in Chicago at 3 a.m.; instead we leave at 11 and won't get to our hotel rooms until 9—in Detroit. Snow has closed the Chicago airport.

On the plane, the players sleep, eat, read newspapers, fool with the stewardesses or play backgammon. "He hasn't lost a game yet," Tomjanovich complains about Dunleavy. In the rear of the first-class section, Rick Barry and Gene Peterson play gin throughout the nine-hour trip. Behind them, passengers come up to the plane's serving section, trying to start a conversation with anyone who might look like a player.

"Excuse me, are you a basketball team?"

"No, soccer," says Newlin. He later confides, "I always tell people we've just won. It stops the conversation." The object of the journey is simply to survive it in good humor, and the players channel all their ill feelings into a constant stream of harmless putdowns.

When we finally land in Detroit, we follow Dick Vandervoort through the terminal, huge goslings behind a diminutive mother goose. We will fly to Milwaukee and then bus to Chicago. We trek downstairs, collect our bags, walk back up through the terminal and wait at the Milwaukee gate while Vandervoort arranges our latest portage.

But when we're ready to board the plane for Milwaukee, we can't—the plane is all booked. Instead, we'll spend the night in Detroit. We march downstairs and begin our wait for the bus that will deliver us to the hotel. When Vandervoort informs us we must share rooms tonight, Barry declares with dismay, "This trip is the worst I've ever had in 13 years."

The team's arrival in Chicago (after another delayed flight) is its only success of the day. A story in the afternoon paper

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Canada
SO MUCH TO GO FOR.

says that Barry and the team are arguing. The story distorts several incidents—on this trip, the trouble hasn't been between personalities, but talents—but the players are upset by the article and complain about it as they wait in the motel lobby for the bus to the arena. "That's what happens," Slick says philosophically. "You start playing .500 ball and they start writing that crap."

Few of the lockerrooms on this trip have been comfortable, but the one in Chicago Stadium is a foul-smelling place that the Rockets can't wait to leave. While the players sit at their stalls, Harris, referring to the newspaper article, says, "Let's show some togetherness tonight." "All right," answers Newlin, "we'll walk out on the floor holding hands." Nissalke says, "I don't give a damn about togetherness, but you've got to weigh everything you might say in an unguarded moment." He looks at Barry's photo in the newspaper, the player's face distorted in a howl of protest. "Jesus, Rick, where did they get this photo?" Barry says it was taken during last year's playoffs. "Naw," says another player, "it was when you benched him." Everyone laughs.

Nissalke looks at the narrow blackboard on which he has scribbled the names of the starters and their matchups,

a list of things the team must do to win and several diagrams of Chicago's favorite plays. Harris has done a good job of scouting the Bulls, but execution is everything—and the team has once again missed a practice because of yesterday's delay. "I'll tell you," Nissalke says, "coaches around the league don't like our team. They say we've got a bad mixture. Gene Shue said we were too slow. Well, I didn't comment on Gene's team, on Lloyd Free shooting from 30 feet out with 18 seconds on the clock. But that's his business. I'm not ready to say we're too slow until March." He claps his hands suddenly. "Make them break up the stack tonight, be tough on D." As the Rockets leave the room, Nissalke says, "Jesus, it stinks in here."

Despite all the talk, the game is a blow-out for the travel-spent Rockets. The physical and emotional reserves of the players have been tested all week long, and their most difficult opponent has been the punishing schedule itself. The Chicago fans were thrilled by their team's easy victory this night, but they did not see good basketball. The NBA's Traveling Road Show is, quite simply, not a first-class show.

Still, no one in Chicago was as happy as the Rockets. They were finally going home.

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The Glorious NBA In-the-Air Show

“Why ride,” says one player,
“when you can fly?”

This photo essay shows some
of basketball's highest fliers
acting like the law of gravity
was never discovered

Basketball players have always spent a good deal of their time cruising at altitudes of several feet, leaving the ground somewhere around the foul line, dipping and weaving through the air like windblown birds sailing toward the hoop. But never before has the NBA's airborne division had quite so many flight commanders—in-the-air artists who baffle defenders, infuriate conservative coaches and, most of all, delight spectators with their antigravity antics.

For the ground-hugging pedestrians in the stands, the aerialists perform vicarious wonders—producing the most exciting plays in the game. But there's more to it than thrills. Some players develop a remarkable “hang time”: they stay aloft like a Ray Guy punt, floating so long that they have time to start with the ball at waist level, scoop it overhead, fake a shot, spin around and slam in a reverse dunk, all before landing. Or they can disdain the shot and shovel the ball off to a teammate, who has easily eluded his own distracted opponent.

Captured in this photo essay is a flight formation of players you always seem to be looking *up* at: big men like Sonic Jack Sikma and Rocket Moses Malone; the 76ers' Julius Erving, whom Celtic General Manager Red Auerbach calls “the best jumper I've ever seen”; first-year Jazz jumping jack James Hardy; the Spurs' soaring and scoring duo of George Gervin and Larry Kenon; the Bucks' sensational Marques Johnson; the Nuggets' spring-legged David Thompson, and Hawks forward John Drew, whom Portland coach Jack Ramsay says, “shoots and follows his own shot better than anyone in the game.”

What members of the airborne division do in flight is as instinctive as it is for birds. The moves are more

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL SKALAK, JR.

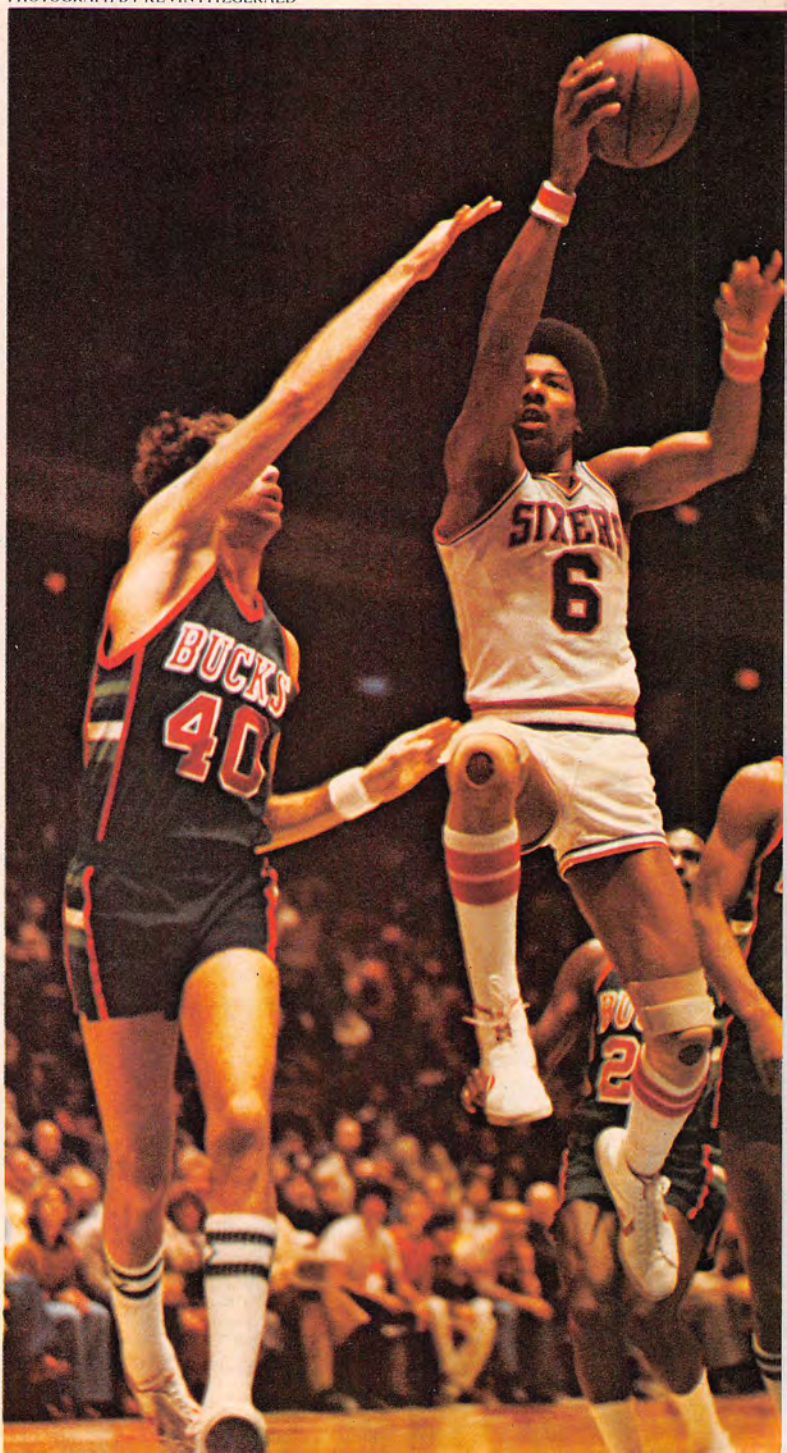


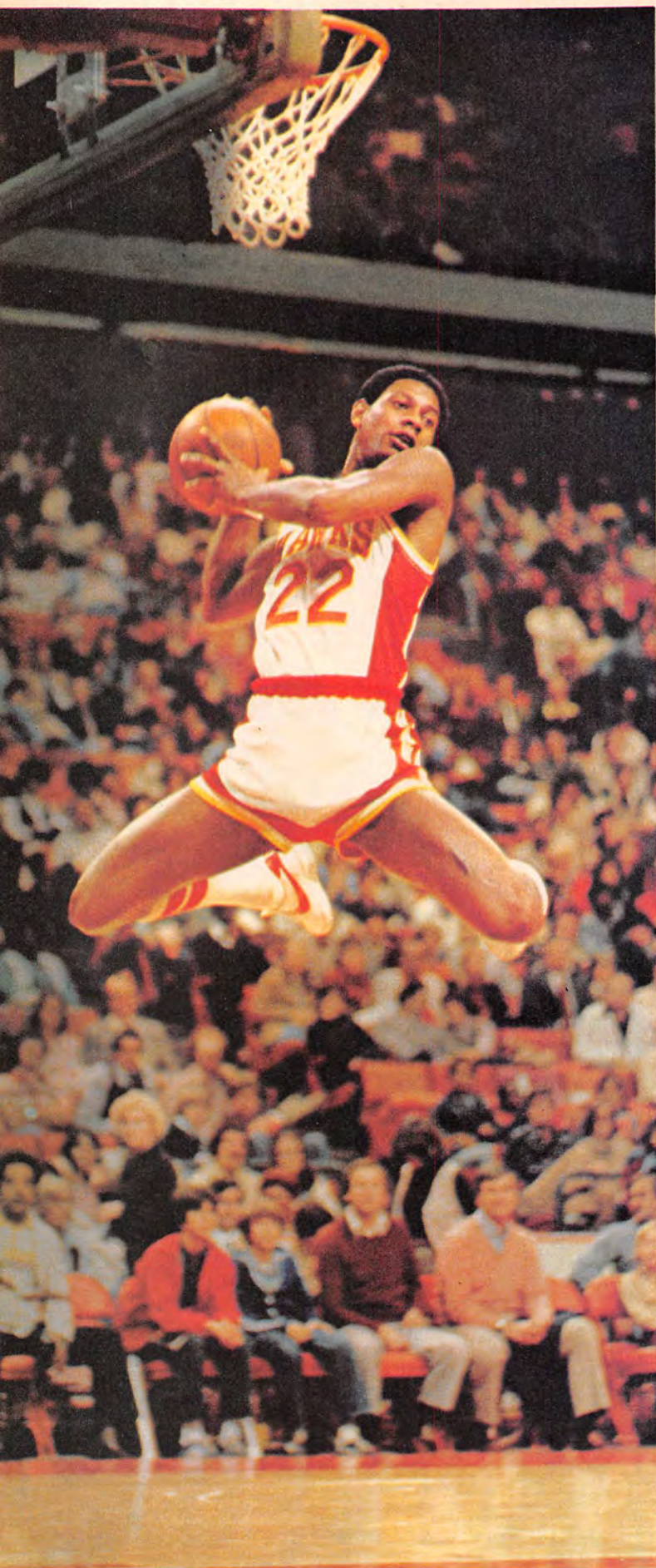
PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER TRAVERS

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN FITZGERALD



Spurs Iceman George Gervin (left) goes it alone; Jazz rookie James Hardy slamdunks (top); Rocket center Moses Malone (above) twists around Celtic Dave Cowens; and (right), Doctor Julius Erving makes a house call on the Bucks' John Gianelli.





In-the-Air

reflexive than predetermined—players sense rather than see what's going on around them. But they can calculate, too; they can *use* their floating. Drew, one of the most-fouled players in the league, often lets his aerial technique take him to the free throw line.

"This is one of my secrets," Drew says, "but I'll tell it to you. When I'm on offense and I'm in the air and I have the ball, I hold it out in front of me. Most defenders reach for the ball and they hit my arm. I'm strong enough to keep control."

Control is crucial to in-the-air play. Auerbach says, "It's one thing to talk about jumping and another thing to talk about jumping under control. Bill Russell was the best jumper of his day, I think—of course he was mostly on the boards—and he was in control all the time."

Much of control is strength—Drew does leg presses, Kenon runs, Hardy does stretching exercises for "flexibility"—to retain balance and not lose the ball. Many coaches preach the dangers of players committing themselves too soon, losing control. Kenon says he gets away with abandoning the floor so much because "I have the hands to control the ball. If I can take off into the air and I see somebody open to pass to, I can control the ball to the point where I can float a little while and if somebody covers the man right quick, I can pass to somebody else."

Floating produces options for those who are expert at it. And for those men, it's the best part of the game. "Why ride," says Larry Kenon, "when you can fly?"

"It feels like suspended animation would feel," says Marques Johnson, "especially when you're coming down and jumping into the crowd of players. It's like you press a time-warp button while you're in midair and you stop for awhile just hanging up there. Everybody else comes down and you're still up there. Then you press another button and you come down. It's a good experience, you know? But it's too short."

"Let me put it this way," echoes Drew. "Being a kid growing up, well, most kids like to dunk the ball, touch the rim, *get above* the rim. Once I could reach up there, it was a big thing in forming my ego . . . and when I jump, I like to put my legs up under me. Psychologically I feel like I'm jumping higher."

Of course, he's not *really* jumping any higher.

"Maybe not, but it feels good. It's good for the mind. And what's good for the mind is good for the game."

—Richard Turner

John Drew says "I feel like I'm jumping higher" when he tucks his legs.

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In-the-Air

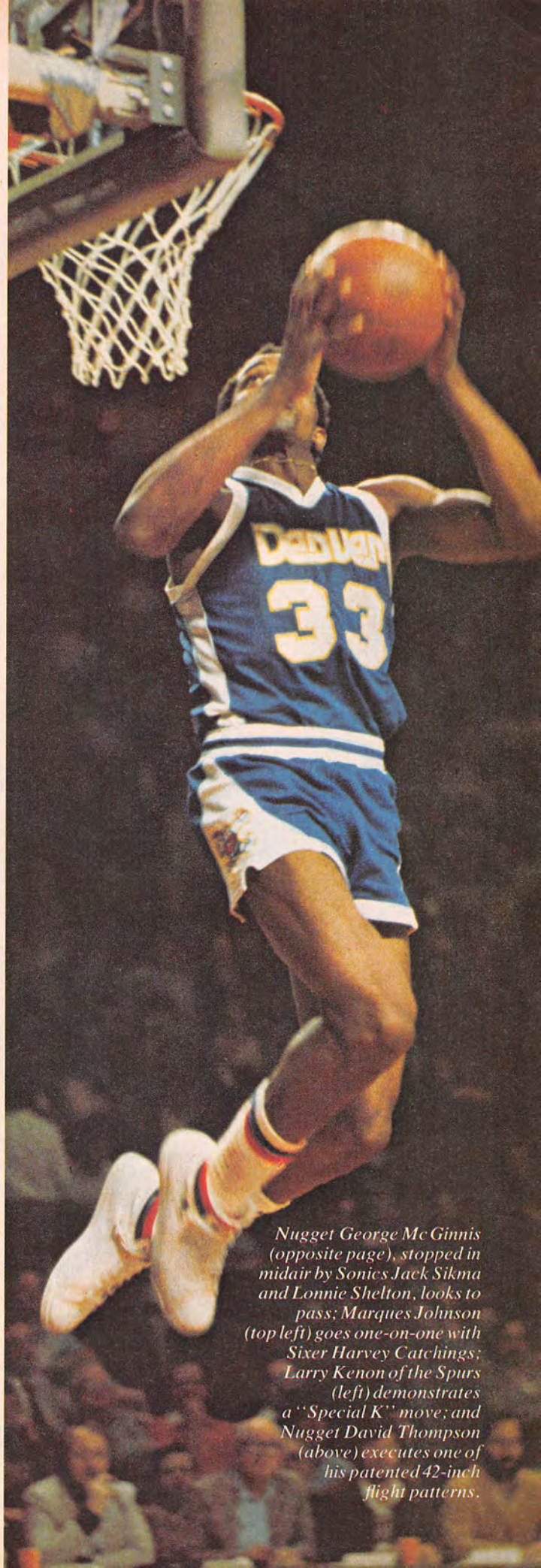
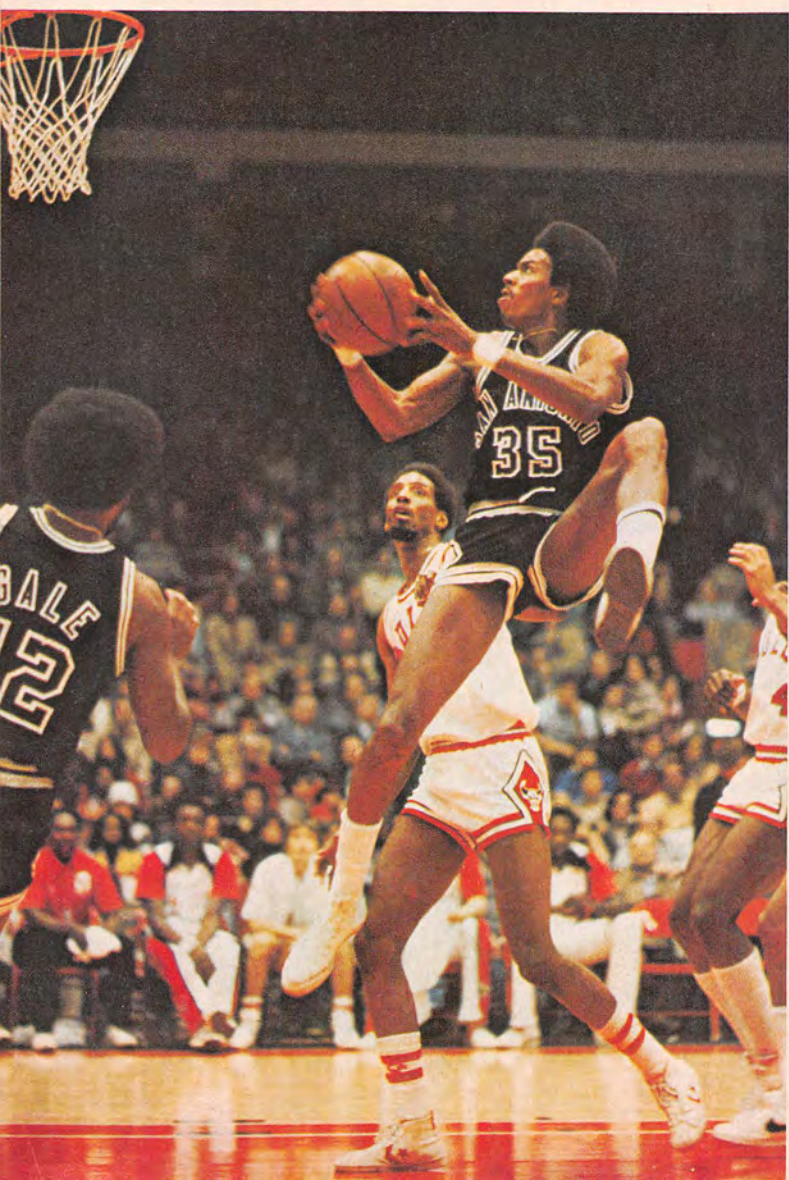


▽ PHOTOGRAPH BY AL SZABO

▽ PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL SMITH

▽ PHOTOGRAPH BY ROY HOBSON

▽ PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN BIEVER



Nugget George McGinnis (opposite page), stopped in midair by Sonics Jack Sikma and Lonnie Shelton, looks to pass; Marques Johnson (top left) goes one-on-one with Sixer Harvey Catchings; Larry Kenon of the Spurs (left) demonstrates a "Special K" move; and Nugget David Thompson (above) executes one of his patented 42-inch flight patterns.

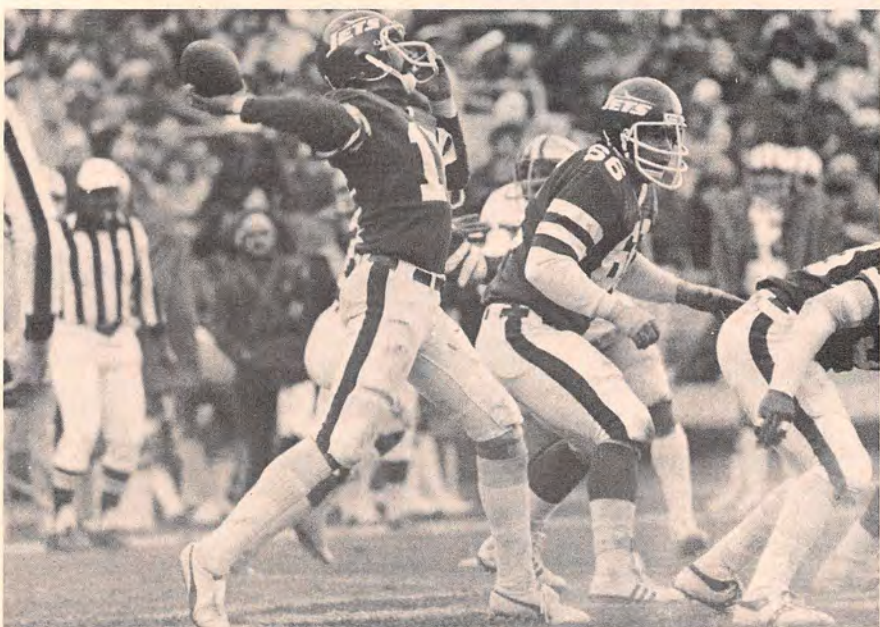
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Every season in every sport, it seems, a few unheralded players suddenly achieve stardom that was unexpected by the coaches and computers. On the following pages we report on three "surprise" stars of the past year. Ozzie Smith was an exceptional high school shortstop, but most pro teams didn't want him because of his "diminutive" size. But the San Diego Padres finally signed him and, after only a half a season of minor-league ball, Smith became their shortstop and made the National League's All-Rookie team. Quarterback Matt Robinson didn't even start during his final two seasons at the University of Georgia. But this ninth-round draft pick stepped into the New York Jets' quarterback slot when Richard Todd was injured, and he performed brilliantly. The Boston Bruins' John Wensink made the National Hockey League as a goon whose most significant accomplishment last year was challenging the entire Minnesota North Stars team to a fight without getting any takers. But this year, Wensink bloomed into one of the Bruins' leading scorers.

From top to bottom, three stars who came from nowhere: Ozzie Smith, San Diego Padre shortstop; Matt Robinson, New York Jet quarterback; John Wensink, Boston Bruin winger.

"I could've made it a few years earlier"



"If you're set," Smith says, "all you've got to do is flick the bat."

The little house in south central Los Angeles—otherwise known as Watts—is mustard yellow and the neatest on the block. No paint peels from the front, the lawn is tidy, the shrubbery well-tended.

Inside, too, there is perfect order. Ozzie Smith, the San Diego Padres' talented 24-year-old shortstop who is about to begin his second season in the majors, sits perched on a couch that is likely to retain its golden luster for at least a century—it is protected by a thick layer of clear plastic. "My mother," says Smith, smiling, "is responsible for that. She's responsible for everything that goes on in this house." He pauses. "Whatever I've achieved, she deserves the credit."

Mrs. Marvella Smith deserves a great deal of credit indeed. After only 68 games in the minors (spent in the Siberia of A-ball in Walla Walla, Wash.), where he batted .303 in 287 at-bats during the 1977 season, Ozzie went to the Padres' 1978 training camp at Yuma, Ariz. as a top prospect, but one who was by no means guaranteed a job with the major-league club. The Padres' regular shortstop was

highly regarded 25-year-old Bill Almon, who had batted .261 in 1977. Almon had led the league in putouts—but he had also led the league in errors with 41. Smith not only provided the Padres with a surer glove than Almon—he made just 25 errors last season—but he hit .258, stole 40 bases in 52 tries and led the league with 28 sacrifices. Padres' manager Roger Craig called Smith "the best young infielder I've ever seen," and credited the rookie with leading the team to its first winning record, 87-78, in the Padres' ten-year history.

But when discussing the season with Smith, the conversation invariably turns back to his mother, a determined black woman, who, though deserted by her husband, managed to bring up a brood of six bright, talented children in spite of it all. And Ozzie, having overcome enormous obstacles through his own hard work and persistence, is determined to pay his mother back.

“This neighborhood,” says Smith, an earnest, quietly self-assured young man, “it’s, well, how can I put it?” He smiles. “Let’s just say there are times I wonder how I got through it all intact.” He points at a wall full of family photographs to the

left of the couch. "See that? That's me up there in my high school graduation at Locke High School. Those are my brothers Carl and Clovis, and that's my older brother Frederick there. My sister Pamela is a senior—she'll graduate this June—and my baby brother Algie will graduate in a couple of years. All six of us will have graduated from high school. In this neighborhood that's saying something, believe me."

Smith's greatest personal battle, however, began after he finished high school in 1972. He had been a brilliant shortstop on his school team, as well as an all-city guard on the basketball squad, but because he is a razor-thin 5-9 (150 pounds), he was not seriously scouted in either sport. "That hurt a lot," he acknowledges. "I knew I had a unique talent. I felt I could have made it as a professional in either sport, but I wanted to be a baseball player. They wouldn't give me a shot."

Ozzie, depressed, was considering simply staying home, hoping that the scouts would return. His mother convinced him to go to college, at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, and continue playing there. That did the trick; after a successful career in college ball, Smith was signed by San Diego for a modest but very welcome \$5,000 bonus.

"The only disturbing thing," Smith says, "is that I could've made it a few years earlier. I had all the tools after high school. It's just that baseball has this fixation on size. They crossed me right off."

There are doubtless a great many baseball executives regretting that now. Smith can do all the little things—hit behind the runner, execute the sacrifice, take the extra base—that are vital to a championship team.

But his glove is what makes him special. Playing the most difficult position in the game, the rookie often left veteran baseball observers awed by his defensive skill. That was primarily a result of his incredible range. Day after day Ozzie magically transformed balls that looked to be sure hits into routine outs. "That's quickness," says Smith. "Quickness, and knowing how to play the hitters. A lot of people tell me, 'You're so fast.' No, I'm not fast, I'm quick—and that's important. My job is to get to the ball."

"Ozzie made plays this season," says Padres broadcaster Jerry Coleman, who once played beside the Yankees' All-Star shortstop Phil Rizzuto, "that I have never seen other shortstops make. He may get smarter, but he's not gonna get a helluva lot better. If we had eight other guys like him, the other team would never score a run. He's amazing."

Smith's most amazing play of all occurred on a July evening in Atlanta. The Braves' Jeff Burroughs drove a hard shot up the middle—a seeming sure hit to centerfield. Smith darted three steps to his left and dove for the ball. Just then the

ball hit a rock and changed direction, careening toward leftfield. In the middle of his dive, his glove hand already extended, Smith reached back with his bare hand, speared the ball, righted himself and threw Burroughs out. Stunned, the Atlanta crowd sat for a moment in silent incredulity, then rose and gave Smith a five-minute ovation. Thereafter the videotape of the play was shown frequently on national television.

"That play," Smith says, "did a lot for me. It brought a lot of recognition to my contribution to the team as a defensive ballplayer."

Smith's hitting in 1978 can hardly be characterized as spectacular. But like everything else about the man last season, it was steady, never rising much higher than .260 and never falling much lower. Smith is a switch-hitter, and although he batted close to .300 lefthanded, his righty figure hovered around .200. "That is one of his only flaws," says Coleman. "But with a glove like his, we'd have been happy if he hit .230."

Ozzie is somewhat defensive about his hitting. "That was always the rap on me," he says, "that I couldn't hit. But I think I help the club with my bat, too. I've made myself a better hitter. I used to think the point was to rear back and drive the ball." He stops and illustrates, leaning back on the couch and taking a fierce, imaginary lefthanded swing. "If you're set properly, all you've got to do is flick it"—he takes a tiny swing as though swatting a mosquito—"and bingo, it goes."

Smith steals bases using the same kind of insights. He's fast, but Maury Wills fast, not Willie Davis fast. Like Wills, Ozzie studies pitchers and, using his quickness, gets the good jump. "I stole 40 bases and was thrown out only 12 times," he says with just a hint of pride. "And I'll tell you something, I was safe a lot of those 12 times. At one point in the season, they were calling me out just because I was a rookie. I don't want to jeopardize next season, but that's the way it was." He pauses. "Still, no one's going to stop me from getting my bases."

Smith's biggest disappointment of 1978 came when the Baseball Writers Association chose Atlanta's Bob Horner, who hit 23 home runs, as the National League's Rookie of the Year.

"Those guys who do the voting," Smith says, "all they do is look at the statistics. They say, 'Oh, that guy hit 23 home runs.' They don't weigh all the small things that make for winning baseball." He doesn't speak in anger, but in wistful resignation.

Still, Smith is not about to let himself be taken for granted. He says that he intends to make a lot of money playing the game. Indeed, the most annoying thing about failing to be named the league's best rookie was the fact that, according to his

estimate, the award would have been worth \$5,000 to him in his contract negotiations.

More than most young players, Ozzie Smith has thought about what success means. In a few months, his mother will move from this house to a much larger one in suburban Riverside County. "My mother has been through it all," he says, "and now she's going to reap the benefits." He chuckles to himself. "We're gonna set us up some new roots."

One of the side benefits to Ozzie's playing in San Diego is that it has kept him close to his family. "My mother made it to a lot of ballgames, and when she didn't she was glued to the radio," he says. "She is a *serious* fan, my mother," Ozzie says as Marvella Smith enters the room with a springy grace, a reminder of the time when she was a talented basketball player in her native Mobile, Ala. "She doesn't show emotion in public, but I would really love to see a film of my mother at a game just after I've done something good."

"See," Marvella says, "bein' small don't make any difference."

Ozzie nods. "In some ways, I think I'm at an advantage because people look at my size and they underestimate me. Well, they can throw it up in my face all they want, I'll knock it out of them."

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"We talked the size business a lot," says Marvella. "My children are all small except the third boy. He's a good athlete, too, but he never did get into it like Oz. Oz always put his whole heart into everything. With him it was night and day, constant. Even in the house, he always had a bat in his hands." She pauses and looks at her son lovingly. "When he said he was gonna do somethin', that boy, he *always* did it."

It appears that Ozzie still plays baseball in the house. There is an official National League hardball on the floor beside the couch where he is sitting, and there is a glove on the floor across the room. "Yeah," he admits, "I feel better having them around. I get a little itchy in the off-season. I'm ready to get back to playing again right now. Last night I was outside throwing the ball around with my little brother."

That sparks a thought in Ozzie. "One of the guys out there yesterday, he told me he always used to see me hanging around the field late at night, working on my game, and he'd think, 'What does that little guy think he's doin'?' Who does he think he is?" He told me that." Ozzie Smith smiles faintly. "There are so many people who thought that. I can't tell you how good it feels to have made fools out of all of them."

MATT ROBINSON

"I waited a long time for this opportunity"



"I can stand there and risk taking a shot to let a receiver get open," says Matt.

By PHILIP SINGERMAN

Against the Washington Redskins in the fourth game of the 1978 season, New York Jets starting quarterback Richard Todd broke his collarbone and was replaced by Matt Robinson, the Jets' obscure, ninth-round draft pick of 1977. Pre-season forecasts had predicted the Jets would finish with won-lost records as bad as 1-15 with Todd; God only knew what nightmares were in store with Robinson calling the plays. The Jets were a young, inexperienced team, and Robinson hadn't been a first-string quarterback since his sophomore year at the University of Georgia.

But instead of buckling, the Jets were

ignited; and 6-foot-2, 196-pound Matt Robinson shocked the football world by proving he not only could throw, but could also mix plays, control the tempo of a game and, in the tradition of such greats as Bart Starr and Johnny Unitas, rally his teammates when they were losing. Behind the 23-year-old Georgian—who was intercepted only four times in his first seven games—the Jets went from a record of 2-2 to 6-5 with wins over Buffalo (45-14), Baltimore (33-10), St. Louis (23-10) and Denver (31-28). The Denver game was an astounding come-from-behind upset in front of 75,092 fans at Mile High Stadium, capped by a game-breaking, 75-yard, fourth-quarter bomb to Robinson's favorite target, lightning-bolt wide receiver Wesley Walker.

From out of nowhere, New Yorkers had themselves a new sports hero, and the media had a field day: What will the Jets do when Todd's collarbone heals? Is Todd still the team's leader, the heir to the throne vacated by Joe Namath? The Jets' coaching staff steadfastly continued to support the one-quarterback system, and announced Todd was well enough to start game 12 against New England. "There was never any doubt what route would be taken when Richard was ready to play again," head coach Walt Michaels said. "I think that was made clear when we first made the statement Todd would be our number-one quarterback."

Todd came out stale against New England, moved the Jets sporadically, and was intercepted three times. Finally, in the last few seconds of the third quarter with the Patriots leading 16-10 and the Jets in a third-and-19 situation, Todd inexplicably called a quarterback draw, reinjured his collarbone on the play and left the field for X-rays. Into the game came Robinson, who, at that point, certainly would have been forgiven for suffering a lapse of confidence, it apparently being his fate to have outstanding performances rewarded with a seat on the bench. At Georgia, after Robinson had led the Southeastern Conference in passing his sophomore year, the Bulldogs installed a veer offense, and for the next two years he played only on those rare occasions when the team threw the ball.

But now, obviously still fired up from seven games at the helm of a National Football League team, the man who had completed only 20 of 54 passes as a rookie came into the Patriot game and quickly threw a 56-yard touchdown pass to Walker to give the Jets a 17-16 lead. "I was psyched," Robinson said later. "I felt good, relaxed. I couldn't wait to step on the field. When I was playing, I wasn't thinking I was the number-two quarterback. I was the number-one quarterback and had to act the part."

After the touchdown pass to Walker, Robinson talked to Todd, whose collarbone had been cracked again. "I'm out for the season," Todd told him. "You're doing a good job. Keep it up."

New England won that game 19-17, but the next week, Robinson and the Jets blew Miami out of the Orange Bowl 24-13, and for the first time Walt Michaels declined to say which man would be his starting quarterback in 1979. "Right now I don't have to make that decision," he said, "so there's no sense commenting."

It is Wednesday afternoon following the Miami game, and after a stiff two-hour practice, Matt Robinson—looking haggard and considerably thinner than his listed weight—sits slumped in front of his locker surrounded by reporters. Robinson has dark, shaggy hair, a fine-featured, handsome face with warm, hazel eyes

and a mustache that droops around the corners of his mouth. There is no cockiness about him, none of the flash or bravado one might imagine a hot young NFL quarterback to possess. Rather, he emits an aura of inner strength that has enabled him to remain calm amid the sudden turmoil of his life. Patiently he answers the reporters' questions for 15 minutes. Then they move off and he lights a cigarette, breathing a sigh of relief. "It gets a little tedious," he says, "but I waited a long time for this opportunity and I don't mind talking to people at all. What bothers me, though, is when they don't take you for your word. Everyone's wanting to know whether there's some deep dark mystery or feud between me and Richard. There isn't. We're friends, but next season we're gonna be competing for the same job. That's all there is to it."

Robinson pulls on an old pair of Levi's, work boots and a faded denim jacket. "C'mon," he says, "let's get out of here and have something to eat." Ten minutes later he sits at a table in the rear of a dimly lit bar-and-restaurant that is an after-workout haven for many Jets, a place where they can usually enjoy a few beers and some food without being hounded by the public; but even here Robinson can't escape attention. Two men in three-piece suits are after him to do a promotional appearance for a fast-food chain; another wants his company at a ski lodge after the season is over. Then, from an adjacent table, Richard Todd kids Matt about one of Todd's old girlfriends in Miami, who, says Todd, is now hot on Robinson's trail. "I don't know about you, Robby," Todd says, grinning. "Steal my job, steal my girls. . . ."

Eventually the bar quiets down and

"Steal my job, steal my girls," Richard Todd (left) has kidded Robinson.



Robinson is left to eat his dinner in peace. "I'm not surprised I've done what I've done with the Jets," he says between bites of steak. "I've always said I don't think you should do anything if you're satisfied being number two. If you don't think you can be best at it, what's the use in doin' it? I came into the NFL thinking I could start somewhere." Robinson's voice is soft and courtly, his manner innocent and fiercely independent.

"I always felt I was blessed," he continues, "that my talent was God-given and that someone was watching over me. I knew sooner or later I'd get my chance. I'm sorry Richard got hurt, but I'm happy I got the opportunity. My life's changed a lot recently and I haven't really sorted it all out yet, but right now all I'm worried about is beating Baltimore next Sunday. If we can get by them we still have a shot at a wildcard spot in the playoffs."

It is late in the second quarter the following Sunday—a freezing December afternoon at Shea Stadium—and the hometown fans are furious. Two controversial calls by the officials—a personal foul nullifying an interception, followed by pass interference—have helped the Baltimore Colts score a touchdown and move ahead of the Jets 10-7. The Jets return the kickoff to the Baltimore 48, and the still-grumbling crowd huddles beneath blankets and parkas to endure the final 97 seconds of conservative ball control.

But wait. What's this? On the first play from scrimmage, Matt Robinson is backpedaling into the pocket and the crowd is on its feet. Robinson looks left, pumps once, twice, looking still to his left, waiting . . . waiting as a swarm of monstrous bodies bears down on him. Then, just as the first Colt reaches him, he fires a 20-yard pass over the middle to Wesley Walker, who angles across the field and streaks down the right sideline for a 48-yard scoring play. Given time by a group of fiery young blockers, the Jets' dynamic duo has struck again, and the fans are delirious. They give their team a standing ovation as the Jets take a 14-10 halftime lead into the lockerroom.

When the teams come out for the second half, the Jets are still behaving like a pack of hungry dogs outside a meat market. And after Baltimore cuts the Jet lead to one point on a third-quarter field goal, Robinson counters with a 21-yard pass to tight end Jerome Barkum, then, after a Baltimore penalty on a punt keeps the drive alive, he goes to Wesley Walker again, hitting him for a 38-yard touchdown. Moreover, the Jets are a cohesive force, united by Robinson, who mixes excellent strategy with exuberant cheerleading in the huddle. The atmosphere is infectious, and the game ends with the Jets in front 24-16.

After the game, Wesley Walker, the first Jet receiver to go over 1,000 yards in

a season since Don Maynard and George Sauer both did it in 1968, is questioned about playing with Matt Robinson. "I couldn't ask for any better passer," he says. "He makes it easy for me. I'm relaxed. Last year I was waiting on the ball and coming back for it. Matt, in a pressure situation, can zip the ball in." Then Walker stops, becomes pensive, and his sensitive face breaks into a slow smile. "There's something different about Matt," he says. "I can hang with him, he's mellow. I enjoy his company."

Near midnight that same Sunday, Matt Robinson sits at a table in a bar on Manhattan's East Side eating dinner with friends who have come up from his hometown of Atlanta to see him play. His face is drained of color, his shoulders sag and his left hand is swollen to nearly twice its normal size. "When you're standing in the pocket," one friend asks him, "do you ever think about those big ole line-men bearing down on you?"

"I tell you," Robinson replies, "the blockers in front of me are getting beat to death all day long. The way I figure it, the least I can do is stand there and risk taking a shot in order to let a receiver get open. That's what I'm paid to do."

"Big time ain't changed Matt one bit," says Mark Wilson, who was Robinson's primary receiver at Georgia.

"I've been real lucky," Matt says. "A lot of guys I played with at Georgia probably resent my success, but I have a friend like Mark here. And I have my parents and two brothers who supported me when I was sitting on the bench my last two years in college. Without them I might have quit, but knowing they were behind me made it bearable."

The Jets' playoff bid ended the following week when they lost to Cleveland 37-34 in overtime. But not before Robinson and his teammates scored 24 points in the final nine minutes of regulation play. Then, obviously dejected after that loss, they took a final 30-7 pounding from Dallas, and wound up with an 8-8 record.

So the question remains—now that Matt Robinson had demonstrated his ability to lead a professional football team with flair and excitement—who will be the Jet quarterback next season? "I'm surprised Matt did so well," Walt Michaels admits, "but not that he took the challenge. He's got a lot of guts. We've got three potentially good quarterbacks here [including rookie Pat Ryan] and I think it's a healthy situation. They're all good friends who root for whichever one is playing, and next season they'll just have to compete for the job."

Whatever the outcome next season, Matt Robinson—a man who surprised everyone but himself as a pro—is destined to be a starting quarterback somewhere. ■

JOHN WENSINK

"The truth is, I didn't do a thing to improve"



The "new" Wensink can still fight, as Montreal's Gilles Lupien discovers here.

By WILLIAM PLUMMER

John Wensink's first goal this night against Vancouver was typical of the hard-working, no-frills Boston Bruins. Wensink heaved the puck into the Canuck end and, in keeping with coach Don Cherry's system, raced down the ice and stationed himself in the slot in front of the enemy cage. Meanwhile, rightwinger Terry O'Reilly plunged headlong into the corner after the puck, trailed by center Peter McNab. The puck popped out to the point, where defenseman Al Sims cut loose an ankle-high slap shot. Wensink tipped it into the net.

It was a good workmanlike goal by the team known as "The Lunchpail A.C." There was nothing proletarian, however, about Wensink's second goal.

Cruising down the left side, he took a neat lead pass from O'Reilly just over the Vancouver blue line and continued down the wing. What followed was one of those frozen moments in sport you can't quite believe.

Instead of tossing the puck back out into the middle, Wensink streaked behind the cage, swooped around, and in one deft motion tucked the disc behind the astonished Canuck goaltender. "Hey,

Wensink," a fan called in disbelief, "who do you think you are—Guy Lafleur?"

John Wensink never has been and never will be Guy Lafleur, but with goals like that—in a game in which he later scored his first NHL hat trick—he's turning heads all around the league. In his two years with the Bruins, the 6-foot, 200-pound left wing had been known primarily as a fighter, one of the toughest in hockey. Recently, though, the heavy with the "wire" hair, the "Wire" nickname and the I-Am-the-Walrus moustache has become a scorer. Wensink—who scored only 16 goals all of last season—became the Bruins' first 20-goal scorer this season in 31 games, and Boston fans who had once razed him for his Neanderthal play suddenly decided that he could do no wrong. Witness their reaction two nights earlier in a game against the Minnesota North Stars:

The Bruins played a lackluster 4-4 tie, and no one looked worse than Wensink. His stickwork was as primitive as it had been in earlier days, he skated as though he were wading through knee-high water, and he executed turns like he was winding leisurely around a traffic circle. What's more, he had been standing in the crease when teammate Mike Milbury put the

puck in the net (nullifying the goal), and later Wensink had lost his wing, allowing the North Star to get off a scoring shot.

The whole Boston team lacked motor skills that night, but it wasn't Wensink who took the heat. The fans heaped abuse on Wayne Cashman, though he had three points in the game; goalie Gerry Cheevers, who was undefeated in nine outings; and Mike Walton, who had just joined the team and was woefully out of shape. Yet no one booed Wensink.

Coach Don Cherry—who had always been one of Wensink's biggest boosters—found the abrupt change in his play hard to believe at first. "Terry O'Reilly improved a little each year, but nothing like this," Cherry said in December, shaking his head. He admitted that initially he'd thought Wensink was just lucky. "But I've changed my mind. Wensink is a goal scorer. In fact, we wouldn't be ten points ahead in the standings if it weren't for John Wensink."

From his first years in Junior Hockey, it was obvious to Wensink what was expected of him as a player. Coaches didn't think he could skate or pass or score. He lacked the skill and precision of flashier players. He could, however, knock opposing players down—with both his body and his fists, so he was used accordingly. "In Juniors," Wensink recalls, "I'd sit on the bench for 59 minutes and the last minute I'd be put in. Or there'd be a fight and I'd be put opposite the guy who caused the ruckus." He was never actually told to fight, but the situation spoke for itself. He had been typecast as a thug.

But five years ago, playing for the St. Louis Blues in this goon role, Don Cherry noticed him. Cherry, then coaching the Rochester Americans, was in St. Louis to trade Bob Kelly, and he admired this muscular kid from an Ontario, Canada, dairy farm. Cherry asked that Wensink be loaned to him for the rest of the season as partial compensation in the Kelly deal.

"He was crude, real crude," Cherry says now. "But he had a quality I liked. He was a good intimidator." The following season, back with the Blues, Wensink had a good training camp—eight points in eight exhibition games. Then he damaged a vertebra in his back and he missed most of that season and the next. By then Wensink's back was healed and his contract with the Blues had expired. But his brief tenure in Rochester had paid off: Don Cherry, by then the Bruin coach, had not forgotten him. Wensink was signed, sent to Rochester for seasoning, and brought up to Boston toward the end of the 1976-77 season.

From the beginning, Wensink played tough. "John's won some very big fights for us," says Cherry.

One such bout took place last season against the North Stars, who had foolishly boasted in the Boston press that

they were the better team after beating the Bruins 3-0 in their first meeting. Wensink was angry and early on in the second game got into a shoving match with wing Alex Pirus. After dispensing with him, Wensink challenged the whole Minnesota bench. "All right," he said, "who's your best man?" No one budged, and the Bruins won all three of their remaining games against the North Stars in 1977-78.

But once in Boston, for the first time in his career, these antics became less important. For one thing, he was getting more playing time, a sign of Cherry's belief in him. "The very first game, he put me into the starting lineup. He knew that if you don't get on until ten minutes into the period, you lose confidence."

More playing time meant that he didn't have to be a one-faceted player anymore. He began to use his toughness more to dig out the puck, to set up his linemates, and to play scrappy defense. "I think a key influence on John," says coach Cherry, "was a remark my brother Dick made. He said to me last season: 'Tell Wensink the only difference between him and O'Reilly right now is that O'Reilly will fall down and get up 50 times because he doesn't care how he looks.'" And Wensink agrees. "I've taken the attitude this year that if I'm going to make a mistake, I'm going to do it trying something."

O'Reilly has noticed a new self-assurance in Wensink: "Last year John would be in a position for his shot but would hesitate. Now he just shoots."

When asked to explain his abrupt transformation, Wensink merely shrugs and smiles his picket-fence-toothed smile. Did he do any special training, for example? "The truth is I didn't do a thing to improve this summer." He pauses impatiently. "You know what I should be saying: 'Yeah, well, I was up at 5 every morning this past summer, running 18 miles a day, pumping weights and eating special foods.'"

At the next day's practice after the Vancouver game—which was just a light workout for Wensink's teammates—"Wire" was wired. He goofed with one teammate after another, wrestling with Rick Middleton during the scrimmage, tweaking the cheek of injured goalie Gilles Gilbert as he bent to drop the puck for a face-off, swiping Dick Redmond's stick and sending it down the ice. His special target was slump-plagued Bob Miller, who was lining up row after row of pucks and peppering the goalie—Wensink kept messing up the neat arrangement, flipping pucks back at Miller.

Finally, Wensink skated right in on the net and rifled a shot. The disc ricocheted off the post and smacked him in the forehead, which at once stung and amused him no end. He staggered theatrically around the rink. Nothing was bothering John Wensink. He had arrived. ■



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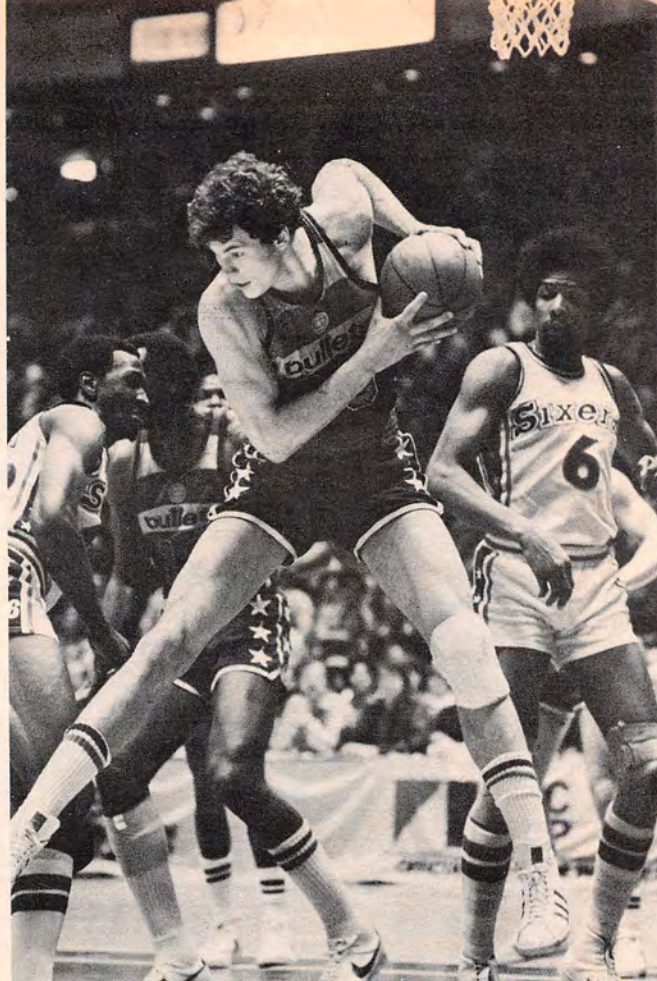


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The Game's Best Sixth Man

Mitch Kupchak, the Washington Bullets' board-banging, sharp-shooting supersub, "lives life like he plays ball—in a hurry and a little reckless"

By MARK RIBOWSKY

A few minutes after the Washington Bullets decimate the Milwaukee Bucks on this mid-November night, a man named Dolph Sand, wearing a sport jacket with "Capital Centre" stitched on it, is running around the Bullets' lockerroom looking for a body to take out to the court for the star-of-the-game show, a brief player interview staged for the remaining fans in the arena. After approaching the first few players and getting no takers, Sand walks over to Mitch Kupchak, the ebullient, galvanic, 6-foot-10 backup center-forward, who is sitting at his locker holding an ice pack on his right calf.

Looking up at him, Kupchak breaks into laughter. "You gotta be kidding!" he squeals. "I think I just played the worst game of my life." Kupchak, averaging

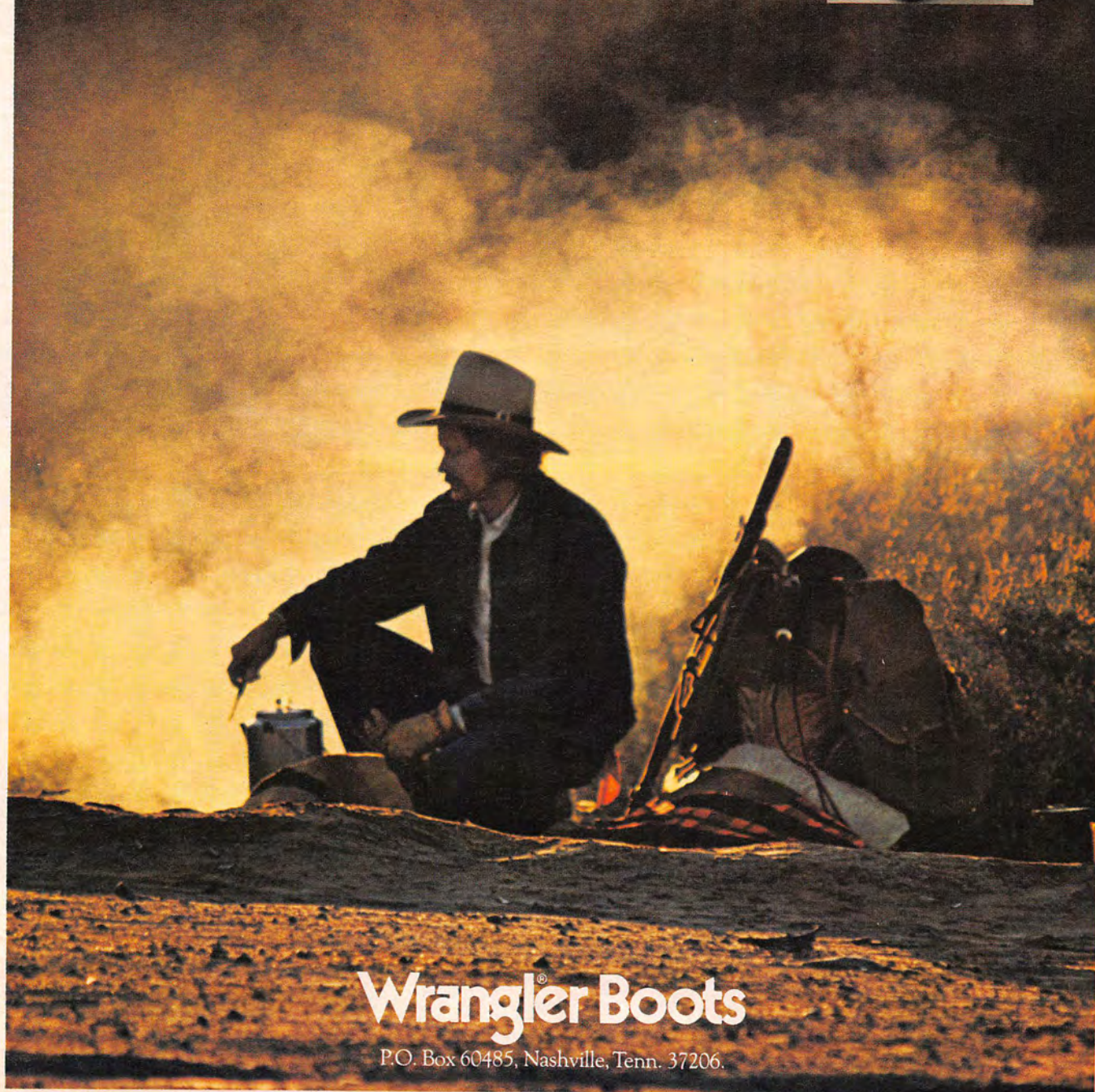
16.2 points a game (despite averaging less playing time than five other Bullets), had scored only 11 in the club's 138-111 pillaging of the Bucks. Eight of those points had come in the last quarter, when both clubs were trying to stay awake waiting for the one-sided game to end. More tellingly, Kupchak had turned the ball over the first four times he'd touched it. He had also made some defensive errors.

When Sand says all that doesn't matter, Kupchak shrugs and asks him, "How much you giving away this year for those interviews?" Feverishly checking his watch, the guy says it's \$25. Kupchak mulls it over. "Okay, let's go. I could use it to pay for a wide-angle camera lens I've had my eye on." The man then leads Kupchak onto the court, and when his name is announced the slowly exiting

crowd gives him a rousing cheer. As Kupchak is being interviewed at center court, Sand says, "He's the only guy in that room who could've come out here after a lousy game and gotten that reaction."

The reaction would seem to be a logical by-product of the way Kupchak plays the game. The 24-year-old Kupchak's vitality, impetuosity and fire on the court has produced a kind of incandescent glow among Bullet fans—and among many members of the Bullet team that in late November seemed primed for a second straight National Basketball Association championship. Big, strong, fast and occasionally rabid in his intensity—in one game during his rookie year he dove after loose balls 14 times—Kupchak, a sure starter on most other teams, backs up all three front-line positions on the Bullets.

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Kupchak tumbles and tussles for every loose ball on the backboard or on the floor. "Mitch doesn't have all the natural talent..." says Coach Dick Motta, "but what he does have he makes better with his hustle and desire."



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Mitch Kupchak

Counted on heavily to light a fuse under the team when he goes in, Kupchak's value is magnified by the fact that he goes in whenever center Wes Unseld, power forward Elvin Hayes or small forward Bobby Dandridge go out. Kupchak is, most experts maintain, the best sixth man in the NBA.

Kupchak has electrified the league ever since his first game three years ago. As a rookie, he played all 82 games, averaged 10.4 points per game, scoring on 57 percent of his shots from the floor (the best mark by a rookie in NBA history), then averaged 16.2 ppg while hitting on 59 percent of his shots in the playoffs. Last season he averaged 15.9 ppg, even though he missed 15 games after tearing ligaments in his right thumb in January. But he came back from surgery to be a critical force in the championship playoff drive: He started three games against the Philadelphia 76ers when Unseld was hurt. Then, with the Bullets down three games to two against the Seattle Supersonics, he shot 7-for-10 and scored 19 points to help knot the series, and went 5-for-7, scored 20 points and made the key offensive move—a three-point play with only 90 seconds left—in the title clincher.

Because Kupchak is so versatile, he poses monumental problems for opposing teams. "He creates favorable mismatches for us," says Bullet coach Dick Motta, who likes to compare Kupchak with Jerry Sloan, the hellaciously tough guard Motta coached with the Chicago Bulls some years ago. "Because we use Mitch at different spots, teams don't know how to gear their defenses. He confuses the hell out of them."

Indeed, in this game against the Bucks, Kupchak had been matched against every Milwaukee forward and center, and although he had a rare off-game, he was the source of constant bewilderment to the Bucks' defense. Finally, they simply threw up their hands and let 6-foot-6 Ernie Grunfeld try to guard Kupchak—who hit four straight baskets on inside moves. Kupchak also started several fast breaks with rebounds, then led everyone upcourt to score on layups.

In the game before this one, Kupchak demonstrated his versatility against the Cleveland Cavaliers' 6-11 Jim Chones by popping in five baskets on soft outside jumpers, a skill he rarely had to utilize as an All-America center at North Carolina. In those days, his game consisted mainly of standing near the basket, waiting for Phil Ford or John Kuester to give him the ball for layups. "He's much more well-rounded now," Motta says. "He's worked like a dog on his shooting and offensive rebounding. Now there's nothing he doesn't think he can do."

As Motta knows—and often confirms with his piercing voice during games—there are still a few aspects of Kupchak's game that need work . . . such as defense and passing. But, as it is, he's probably as good a defensive player as Dandridge and a far better passer than Hayes, who often regards that phase of the game as a mortal sin. Says Motta: "Aside from shooting, Mitch doesn't have all the natural talent in the world, but what he does have he makes better with his hustle and desire, like Sloan did." Or, as Dandridge says, "He's the only 6-10 white guy I know that plays like a 6-1 black guy." But maybe the best thing about Kupchak is that after three years, he can still accept a limited, backup role without bitching about it. At least for now.

In the lockerroom again, the other Bullets get on Kupchak's case about his performance, but he just laughs as he peels off his uniform.

"Hey, Mitch, a guy was just in here looking for you," kids slinky guard Larry Wright. "He was from a brick company . . . he said he wanted your shot."

"If I paid nine bucks for a seat, I'd be mad not seeing guys play with emotion"

"I heard he was from the cesspool and wanted to make a deposit," Elvin Hayes announces.

Sitting next to Hayes, Wes Unseld removes a knee pad and playfully shakes his head. "We were taking bets on when you'd handle the ball without throwing it away," he tells Kupchak, "and nobody won."

Ballhandling guard Tom Henderson walks in from the trainer's room and says as he passes Kupchak: "They made a law in New York that you have to pick up what you dropped tonight, man."

Finally, Kupchak sits down at his locker and replaces the ice pack on his calf—where a black-and-blue mark has been raised, the newest addition to a body covered with assorted contusions as the result of his close encounters with wooden floors. A long, faded scar cuts around the corner of his right eye.

"When I was six I slid down a bannister and crashed into a glass coffee table," he explains. "They took six stitches, but I don't even think I cried, even with blood running all over the place." A grin. "I was always made of solid steel." The voice is high-pitched, the words rushed. The New York accent—he grew up in Brentwood, Long Island—is unaltered by his four years in the South. The body is

not solid steel, but Kupchak did put on a few pounds last summer through weight lifting (he's up to 235) and his thick arms and legs bear no resemblance to the pipe cleaners that stuck out from his body at Carolina.

I ask if he has any explanation for the game he played tonight. Another laugh. "I think the problem was that they sent me in during the first quarter. Usually I don't get in until the second. I wasn't ready to go in, so blame it on the coach, not me. Honestly, though, I have enough confidence in myself to know it was just one of those games you laugh off."

As Kupchak goes to shower, Henderson, smiling widely, says to him: "I'm telling you, you better go out there and pick it up." Walking over to Henderson, I ask if the rest of the Bullets are as easy to ride as Kupchak. He rolls his eyes. "Let me tell you, man, there are a lot of guys in here you don't say *anything* to if they play bad. That's why Kup is so good for our collective head, he's always on a high. . . . Hell, *everybody* likes Kup. Like the black players, they get along with him very well, Kup likes to talk that jive, but he don't sound phony, he sounds *real*. That's funny, too, because two years ago he was kind of a loner. He'd be in a trance after bad games. I'd have to tell him, 'It'll be all right, big guy.' I think the way he played in the playoffs last year made him feel he was important. I think he still gets down, like about not starting. But he can deal with it—on the surface."

Kevin Grevey, the star of the game tonight with 24 points, has just finished talking with the press. Grevey, who two years ago shared an apartment with Kupchak (until Mitch bought a four-bedroom, \$150,000 home in Gambrells, Md.) is considered Kupchak's closest friend on the club. The hot-shooting guard laughs when I ask about Kupchak. "We had a tremendous rivalry in college [Grevey went to Kentucky] and I just *hated* the guy. Here, he was still the enemy to me at first, so it took a while to really know him. He was awfully quiet, and I thought he was naive, immature. Then he started tagging along with me when I went out to bars. It really opened him up. Last year he was partying every night, going out with a lot of women." A giggle. "Now he lives life like he plays ball—in a hurry and a little reckless. Underneath, he's still a naive kid, but he's learned to deal with people and it's helped his confidence. It shows in his game, too. He used to be awkward, unsure."

I ask if Kupchak is bugged by not being able to start. "Yep, no question," Grevey says. "It bugs me, too—not that he doesn't start but that he's not getting more time. He should be getting at least ten minutes at all three positions up there." Kupchak was averaging only about 25 minutes a game. Grevey shakes his head. "I tell you, if things don't im-

Mitch Kupchak

prove in that area in a year or so, I wouldn't blame him if he plays out his contract and leaves."

Several other players in the room also felt that Kupchak should be playing more, but then recognize his dilemma: being in the same box score with Unseld, Hayes and Dandridge. "We know how tough it is for Mitch," Grevey says, "and we really appreciate that he doesn't cause problems by complaining about it." Sometimes, however, others do it for him. After the first playoff loss to Seattle last year, both Hayes and Dandridge suggested that Kupchak start in place of Unseld, whose aching knees and lack of scoring contrasted markedly with Kupchak's quickness and shooting touch. Had Unseld not rallied to lead the Bullets to the title with his rebounding and defense, it would have been the *cause célèbre* of the series. As some Bullets muse, Kupchak's presence may even have provoked Unseld's remarkable recuperation. Motta hints at that when he says, "Having Mitch in the wings is the best motivation I know for those other three up front."

The 32-year-old Unseld will only say, "I feel no heat from Mitch; he's good for me. I can get my breath, not knock myself out for 48 minutes as in the past." But another Bullet says: "Wes is doing some squirming on the bench when he's been sitting lately." Indeed, last season Unseld averaged the fewest minutes-per-game (33) since his injury-riddled 1973-74 season, when he played only 56 games, and this year he was averaging 31. Similarly, the playing time for both Hayes and Dandridge has gone down as Kupchak's has gone up.

When Kupchak returns from the shower, I ask if he's satisfied with the minutes he's getting now.

"I don't know . . . it's hard to say," he begins, lowering his voice. "I can understand why I don't get more time but . . . Wait, I want to say first that I'm satisfied I'm not a second-stringer just because I don't start. I know that Motta wants to look down that bench and see me first. I'm kind of a luxury to the club. I *feel* important. But, no, I'm not content with my role. I don't think I'll ever be satisfied unless I'm playing 40 minutes. I've gotten where I am by working at it, so to have to be, uh . . . confined, in a way, is difficult. I want to be *depended* on, not *hoped* on, not to have to produce right away or be taken right out."

He lifts his head and shrugs. "But I can accept it. It's an abnormal situation in that Wes and Elvin and Bobby D. are better than me. I often look at it from that perspective, and over the perspective of my whole life, and it doesn't matter as

much. I'm in the NBA, I'm healthy, my parents are healthy. I'm very lucky."

Listening to Kupchak, I remember that a Washington writer had called him "dumb." Now I realize the guy couldn't have spent much time with Kupchak or asked him anything requiring a thoughtful answer. Kupchak is an easy caricature because of his fervid play. But he's rarely out of control on the court and he's no oaf off it. A political science and psychology student at North Carolina, Kupchak's sensitivity is made clear by the way he speaks of his off-season trip to Israel ("The most awesome experience of my life") and the way he reacted when he was fined a total of \$1,750 for a fight he had with the Knicks' Lonnie Shelton last year. "It messed up my head and my game for a while," he says. "Being fined all that money [as was Shelton, who is now with Seattle] for defending myself, it ate at me. I was worried people would think it meant I was sadistic rather than aggressive." As he speaks, there is a vulnerability in Kupchak's face that you never see on the court.

Now, when I ask Kupchak whether he's thought about playing out his contract (one year plus two option years left) and going elsewhere, he says, "I'm not gonna talk about it, no reason to yet. I like it here, we have something good going. That's what I want to think about." He thinks about it a moment. "Motta has told me that as long as he's here, I'm gonna get more of a role. He's never lied to me." I tell him that I thought Motta had singled him out for heated instructions whenever the Bucks brought the ball down the court, yelling such things as: "Mitch! Close down the lane!" Kupchak's grin returns. "I was yelling at *myself*. . . .

"I want to be depended on, not hoped on," says Kupchak, who grudgingly accepts his sub's role on Motta's Bullets.



Motta's been doing a lot of yelling at me lately, though. I take that to mean he's taking a greater interest in me."

Kupchak slips into a pair of baggy blue corduroy pants, a white knit shirt, leather bomber jacket and scuffed-up loafers—with no socks. "Never wear 'em," he says. "I like to feel comfortable. I don't even own a suit." Hearing that, Grevey shouts from across the room, "You think he dresses bad *now*? You should've seen him two years ago. This is Pierre Cardin by comparison." Sitting next to Kupchak's locker, reserve guard Charles Johnson shakes his head as he sips a can of beer and says, "Man, how can you wear that?" Kupchak feigns anger and tells Johnson that his own outfit—jeans and a T-shirt—isn't exactly high fashion. "Listen here, Kupcake," Johnson shoots back, "to put me in your clothes would be like putting a Bengal tiger in a chimpanzee suit."

Kupchak laughs, then stuffs cans of beer into his bag and exits, saying, "If anyone finds any stat sheets of tonight's game—burn 'em." Down the corridor, Kupchak meets the Bucks' Ernie Grunfeld and Quinn Buckner, teammates of his on the 1976 U.S. Olympic team, whom he takes out on the town whenever the Bucks come in. Grunfeld tells Kupchak he's got a lift from Grevey tonight and will meet him downtown, and Kupchak, Buckner and I walk to the parking lot, where Kupchak finds a carnation and a letter on the windshield of his gray Monte Carlo. "I'll read it later," he says as we pile into the car, which is littered with newspapers and empty beer cans. Kupchak then heads for the Georgetown nightclub area. "You wanna go have a few drinks?" he asks a weary Buckner, who slumps in his seat in despair—the Bucks have lost four of their last five games. Buckner says, "No, I wanna go have a whole lot of drinks."

I ask Buckner about living with Kupchak in Montreal during the Olympics and he smiles. "Mitch here was a quick learner . . . a little slow at first, but after we won the gold medal we both went out to . . . what was that place?"

"Sir Walter's . . . a good place to tear off some fun," Kupchak says.

"A sweet place! We didn't get back until 10 in the morning. Everyone else had already packed up and gone home and we were just gettin' in." He looks at Kupchak. "That was something else that night, wasn't it?" Kupchak's answer is a broad smile.

As the car races down the Capital Beltway, Kupchak and Buckner get into a discussion of whether technical-foul fines are tax deductible—both men get more than their share of them—and Kupchak says through a grin: "That's why I got into that fight with Shelton, I needed a write off." After a half-hour drive, Kupchak parks in front of a singles place

Up tight?

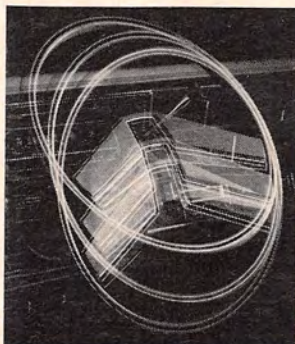


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Mitch Kupchak

called The Foundry. Inside, a pretty fair former Atlantic Coast Conference-Southeastern Conference All-Star team sits at the bar with glasses in hand. The Bucks' Brian Winters catches up on old times with Kevin Joyce, his former backcourt mate at South Carolina and now an assistant coach at the school, as Grunfeld (from the University of Tennessee) and Grevey check out the house. Kupchak pulls up a stool and orders a round of Heineken for the party as a pretty brunette says, "Remember me, Mitch? Remember that night last year?" Another huge smile says he does.

A sandy-haired man sitting next to Grevey introduces himself as Russ Foster and says he also lived with Kupchak and Grevey. "Mitch is a really beautiful guy," he says. "He'd do anything for you. One time, Kevin had to cancel out on a Cancer Fund banquet that I put together in South Carolina and Mitch said he'd come for him. I didn't think he would because it was on a Monday morning following a Sunday night game and it was such short notice. But he left right after the game and drove all night to get there. His word is gold."

Ernie Grunfeld leans in. "Listen," he tells me. "Mitch is probably the most-liked guy in the league because he's so dedicated. I remember in Montreal, he was running laps by himself while everyone else was sleeping. The Bulls don't know what they're missing not using him 40 minutes. Jesus, I wish we had him."

After two hours, Kupchak, Buckner, Grunfeld and I get into Kupchak's car and drive to another part of town. Kupchak parks on a side street and we walk a few blocks toward another singles spot when we pass a noisy, crowded bar. Seeing three scantily-dressed blonds jiggling on the counter as they're sprayed with seltzer water, Grunfeld says, "They're having a wet T-shirt contest in there. Let's go."

Once inside, Kupchak bets Grunfeld a beer on who the winner will be, and loses. "Ah, they just gave it to the one with the most showing," he sneers as we leave. "Hell, in Ft. Lauderdale they don't wear anything. That's the way the contest should be." The next stop is a bar called Paul Mauls, where Kupchak spots an old friend—"a former Miss Maryland," he calls her. But when the place closes at 2 a.m., Kupchak ambles out into the now-freezing morning with a semi-attractive brunette hanging on his arm. He makes it clear, in a nice way, that he doesn't want the girl to go any farther with him, but she forces him to kiss her good night.

Afterward, as we are en route back to Washington, Kupchak hits a bump in the road and we hear a whining noise from

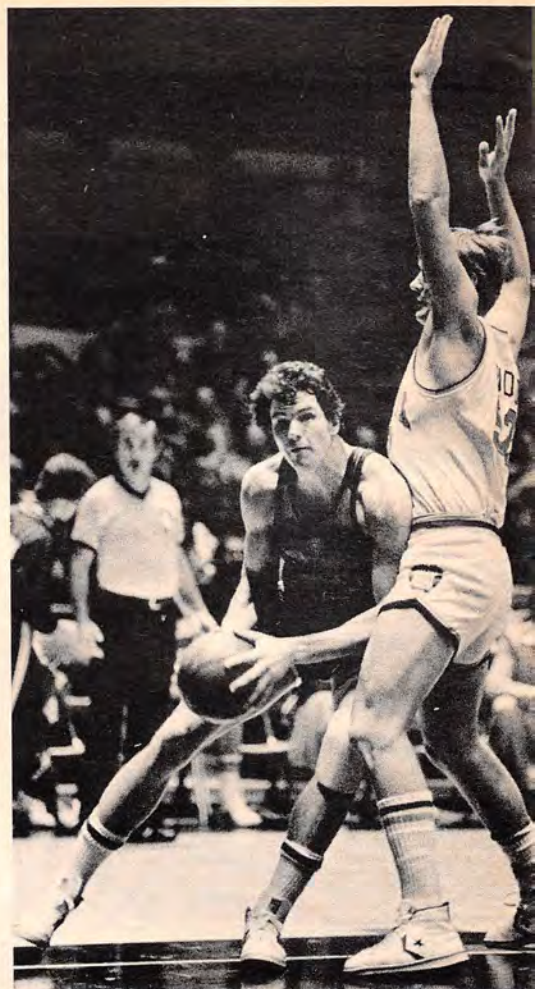
under the car. "I can get rid of that noise," Kupchak says. He opens the windows and turns the car stereo up full blast.

At noon the next day, a groggy, gaunt-looking Kupchak sits in a Howard Johnson's restaurant near the Capital Centre sipping some chicken soup. "We had an optional practice at 11 in the morning today," he says. "No way I could make it after last night." He looks a little disturbed about something. "Listen, I don't want you to get the wrong impression from last night. If we had a game or practice today, it wouldn't have been like that. I'm not irresponsible. I just enjoy a good time now and then. You don't get to have a lot of them during the season."

As Kupchak finishes his soup and starts on a club sandwich, I wonder aloud if it's gotten harder for him to keep stoking his renowned enthusiasm after two years. "Definitely," he says. "It's getting harder and harder. But I'm fortunate in that I've always played with a certain aggressiveness that goes back to my childhood. I played a lot of playground ball where you never waited for whistles because there was no such thing as a foul; you just kept going, moving, running. I also played with a lot of black kids, so I developed a certain style, the challenge aspect, having to play for respect. Being on a team meant you gave it all you had. I remember going to Knick games in the Garden and seeing Walt Frazier sitting by himself and not getting in the huddle during timeouts and it really disgusted me. I hate a dead bench. If I paid nine bucks for a seat, I'd be mad not seeing guys play with emotion."

Kupchak—"It's Ukrainian, my grandparents on both sides of the family came from the Ukraine before the Russians swallowed it up"—was born in Hicksville, N.Y., the first son of a construction inspector and his wife who moved to nearby Brentwood six years later. His first love was baseball—he's still a rabid Yankee fan with a store of trivia questions about the team—until, he says, "the strike zone got too big," the result of his growing four inches, to a bony 6-5 and 140 pounds, in the ninth grade. It was then that the high school's basketball coach, Stan Kellner, "pulled me right out of the hall one day and made me do things I didn't want to do, like dribbling. For a while, all I did was trip over my feet."

But by his senior year, he was an all-county center and a 6-foot-9 plum for college recruiters. "I'd decided to go to Notre Dame, then changed my mind. I don't know why, really. I just decided I'd rather play in the ACC." The choice came down to Virginia and North Carolina. "Why Carolina? I don't know, I just liked [coach] Dean Smith because he never promised me anything. He told me the truth, that I'd have to sit a while be-



Kupchak lifted weights to become stronger and harder to contain, as Knick John Rudd found out while trying to guard him.

fore being a star. I also liked the players, they hung out together, had that togetherness." Kupchak credits one of those players, Bobby Jones [now with the 76ers], with making his game bloom: "He changed my head about playing center. I grew up watching Wilt [Chamberlain] and Kareem [Abdul-Jabbar] on television and I thought I could play their game . . . you know, holding the ball over my head while the traffic cleared, then jamming it. Bobby showed me that a big man could be versatile—that I could run, pass, help out on defense. Plus, he had a heart problem and is mildly epileptic, and seeing him play like he did made me want to work that much harder."

Of Coach Smith, Kupchak says: "It always amazed me how he could manipulate us, make us fear him, even though he never once used a cuss word; the harshest thing I ever heard him say was, 'Gosh darn it.' He was a tough S.O.B. and sometimes very cold—especially to freshmen and sophomores—but when I had a back operation [for a slipped disc] after my junior year, I'll never forget Dean walking into the operating room in a surgical mask and gown. I understand he

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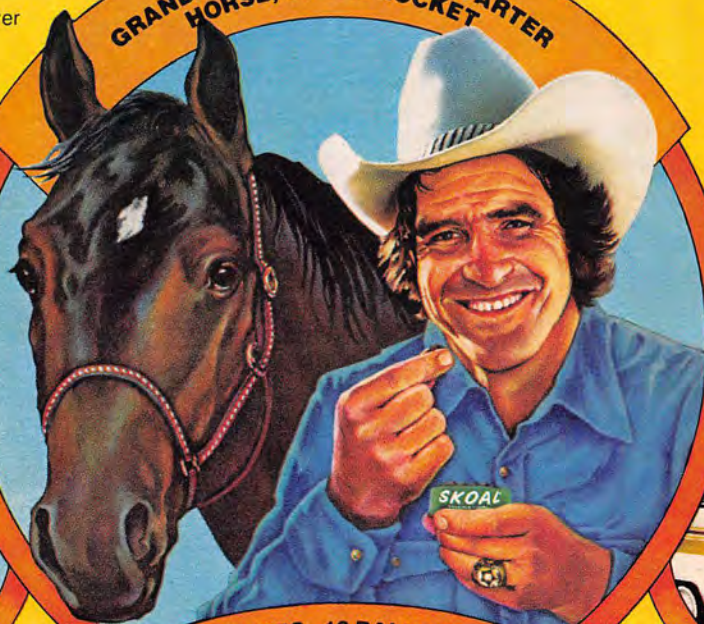


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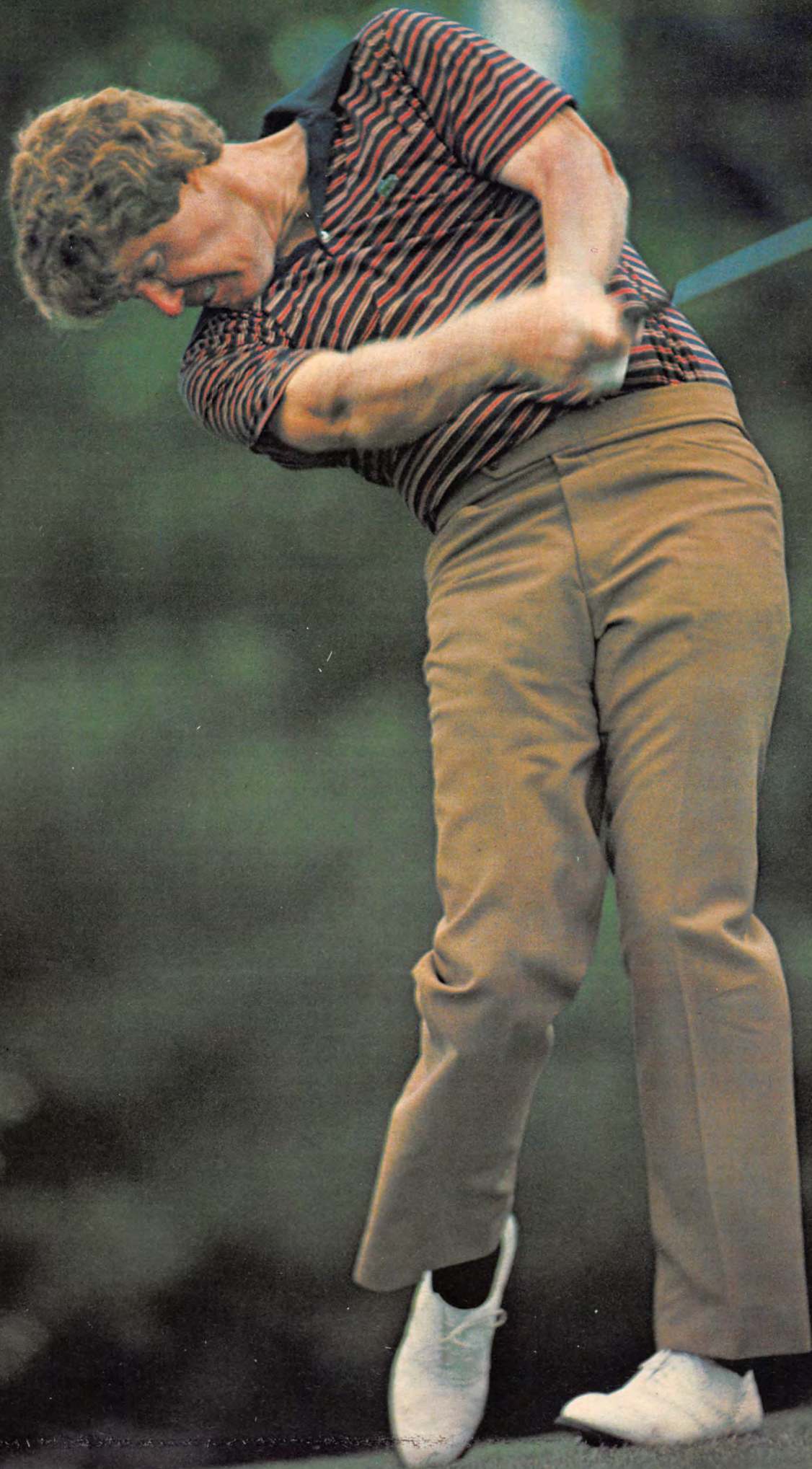
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Andy Bean Gets Mad at Good Shots

The third-leading money winner
on the PGA Tour last year also manhandles alligators,
bites through golf balls and works like hell to be the best.
Yet he admits, "I got to be more patient"

By DAVE ANDERSON

All the other golfers had departed. The practice tee was empty. So was the lockerroom. But in the long shadows of a golden sunset, Andy Bean was hunched over his putter on the Westchester Country Club's huge practice green. He had arrived at the old Tudor clubhouse shortly after seven o'clock that morning. He had teed off in the Westchester Classic at 8:48 and shot a par 71 with birdies on the last two holes. All afternoon he had talked about "how tired" he was of tournaments, how he couldn't hold his concentration, how he needed a rest. But in a Georgia drawl that reminds you of Andy Griffith, the 6-foot-4, 210-pound redhead also talked of "how much I love to play this game; I love it every time I hit a shot the way I want to." And now, nearly 12 hours after teeing off, he had returned to practice—the only pro on the green.

At the time, Andy Bean did not really need to practice. As the Westchester Classic began late last summer, he was the PGA Tour's leading money-winner with \$257,653; he would finish the year with \$267,241, third to Tom Watson and Gil Morgan but ahead of Jack Nicklaus.

Now, as the shadows dissolved into darkness, Andy Bean was putting from far across the green. Three consecutive long putts plunked into the cup. The next missed by inches. Then another plunk, and another; five out of six. The cup had to be emptied. Quickly, another plunk. And another. Eventually eight out of 11 went in. With a smile, he scooped his golf balls into a white shag bag. Earlier he had practiced short chip shots from scruffy lies off the green.

"You got to practice chip shots out of bad lies, not good lies," he was saying now as he drove out of the club's big driveway. "That's how you learn what a ball does from certain lies, what type of spin it takes. The more you do it, the more you develop a feel. Chip shots save pars. That's the shot you got to get pretty close to make money out there. Just like you got to work on your puttin' stroke to make money."

"At one stretch," he was told, "you made eight out of 11 from 20 feet."

"Thirty feet," he said with a grin. "And you didn't start countin' early enough. My last 30, I made 16. Most guys my size try to gorilla the ball, but I work at the touch shots, too."

"But why," he was asked, "did you go back there so late to practice?"

"Some guys are satisfied with where they are," he said, "but I want to be the best and that takes a little more work sometimes. I don't want to play second fiddle to anyone. To win more than anyone, to be the best, you got to work more than anyone."

Jack Nicklaus is still the best golfer. Tom Watson is the No. 1 challenger. Lee Trevino and Gary Player are the old pros; Arnold Palmer the living legend. But if Andy Bean were a boxer, he would be known as a contender—a strong contender. Strong enough to have outgrown the gimmicks. Almost. Until recently he was known mostly for biting chunks out of golf balls (which he did for a national TV audience early last year at the Phoenix Open) and for wrestling alligators (which he's never done).

"I just flipped one over by the tail once," he says, "I never wrestled one."

The flip occurred in 1975 at Walt Disney World when he was paired with a golfer named Sandy Galbraith at the PGA

Tour qualifying school. They were strolling along a fairway when an alligator clambered out of a nearby pond.

"Hey," said Galbraith, "look at that."

"Aw, that ain't nothin' but an ol' 'gator," said Bean, who often had seen alligators while growing up on Jekyll Island off the Georgia coast. "That ol' 'gator's harmless."

"It doesn't look harmless to me," Galbraith said.

"Watch," said Bean. "I'll show you it's harmless."

Sneaking up from behind, Bean grabbed the six-foot reptile by the tail, flipped it over easily and laughed. Galbraith was awed.

"By the time we got back to the clubhouse," Bean says now, "Sandy was talking about how I wrestled it."

But he *has* bitten golf balls. Several dozen. He bites golf balls for laughs now, or sometimes to win a \$50 bet from a skeptic. But the first time he did it in anger: He was at the University of Florida, an All-America golfer paired with Jay Haas, then at Wake Forest and now a touring pro, in a college tournament. Near the end of their round, Andy had hit every green in regulation. He was 2 under par as he surveyed a 4-foot birdie putt.

Haas, who had hit only 11 greens in regulation, then holed a 30-foot putt to go 4 under.

Moments later Bean missed his birdie putt. Storming to the next tee, he put his golf ball between his teeth and crunched. Off came a chunk of the dimpled cover. Spitting it out, he flung the gouged ball into nearby bushes.

"I didn't think anything of it," he says now, "but Jay jumped in those bushes and got the ball. For the rest of the day, he showed it to everybody."

No matter how many major championships and how much prize money Andy

Bean is a 6-4 powerhouse famous for long drives. He's "very strong and has a marvelous touch," says Jack Nicklaus.

Andy Bean

Bean wins, he'll always be remembered as the man who bites golf balls. But Bean prefers to remember the three tournaments he won in 1978—the Kemper Open, the Memphis Classic and The Western Open.

The previous year he won the Doral-Eastern Open, his first tour triumph. He won't be 26 years old until March 13, but his career earnings of \$405,315 are the most of any golfer in his first three years on the PGA Tour; he also has earned the respect of Jack Nicklaus, among others. "Andy's very strong and he has a marvelous touch," Nicklaus says. "But this year he's got to manage his schedule better. He played too many tournaments last year." Bean agrees. Early last year he played 17 tournaments in a span of 18 weeks. He had a later run of eight in as many weeks.

To those who envy the life of a big-money winner on the golf tour, playing almost every tournament might seem the ideal existence. Andy Bean once felt it was, too. But no longer. "I used to hear guys talking about how they were playing too much and I thought they were crazy—

how could you play *too much* golf?" he says. "But now I know what they mean. If you're out here too long you're just playin'. You hit good shots but you don't score. I'm going to have to concentrate on playin' the tournaments at the golf courses where I play well. And this year I'll pay more attention to the major championships."

Golfers are judged not so much by the prize money they win as by the major titles they win, meaning the Masters, the U.S. Open, the British Open and the PGA championship.

Jack Nicklaus, for example, is exalted because of his performances in major tournaments. As a pro, he has won 17 major events, more than any other golfer. And, at age 39, he is still chasing the elusive grand slam—winning all four in the same year. As if such an accomplishment were unthinkable for any other golfer, only Nicklaus has been asked serious questions about the possibility of a grand slam. But it is a measure of Andy Bean's confidence—and ambition—that he says, "At my age, I've got as good a chance as anybody for the grand slam."

But at his age, Bean occasionally lets a bad shot, a bad hole or a bad break intrude on his concentration. Golf people like to tell about the time Sam Snead was

about to stroke a tricky short putt when the silence was shattered by the screeching brakes of a car on a nearby street. Snead calmly made the putt and when he was asked later if the car had bothered him, he replied, "What car?" Bean's concentration isn't that soundproof yet. At the U.S. Open last year he was standing over a short wedge shot when he suddenly looked up and backed away from his ball.

"Some damn car was going by with its stereo turned up loud," he explained later. "You could still hear it half a mile down the road."

His concentration broken, he blew the wedge shot and, by the halfway mark, dropped four strokes behind Andy North, the eventual winner.

"Jack Nicklaus plays a bad hole, he regroups," Bean says. "So many times if he gets a bogey or a double-bogey, he'll come back with a birdie on the next hole. I got to learn not to let bad shots affect me. I got to be more patient."

It won't be easy. Andy Bean was driving down the West Side Highway last summer to visit the David Crystal sportswear showroom in New York. He was with the girl, Debbie Rodeffer, who would soon become his wife, and as he moved into Manhattan's street traffic, a horn honked behind him. He turned and glared.

"Somebody's gonna honk their horn at me once too often in this town," he snapped. "Keep that damn horn quiet."

He's the same way on the golf course—a man of quickly changing moods. That morning in the Westchester Classic he was glowering as he struggled to stay at even par. But when he birdied the 13th hole, he suddenly was laughing, smiling and joking. Coming off that green, he teased J.C. Snead, saying, "You're just not as good as I thought you were." And when Snead pushed his drive into the rough on the 15th hole, Bean wandered over to where J.C. was inspecting his lie in the deep grass.

"You want a tee?" Bean asked.

But when Bean left a 15-foot downhill putt short of the cup on the 15th green, his mood changed back to a glower. "You got a chance to make a birdie," he scolded himself, "you can't even get it to the hole." Moments later, on the 16th tee, he smashed a 1-iron shot down behind the sloping green of the 204-yard hole.

"Look at this mess," he groaned when he arrived at his ball. "I ain't got a prayer. Even if I hit a good shot, I'll go 40 feet past."

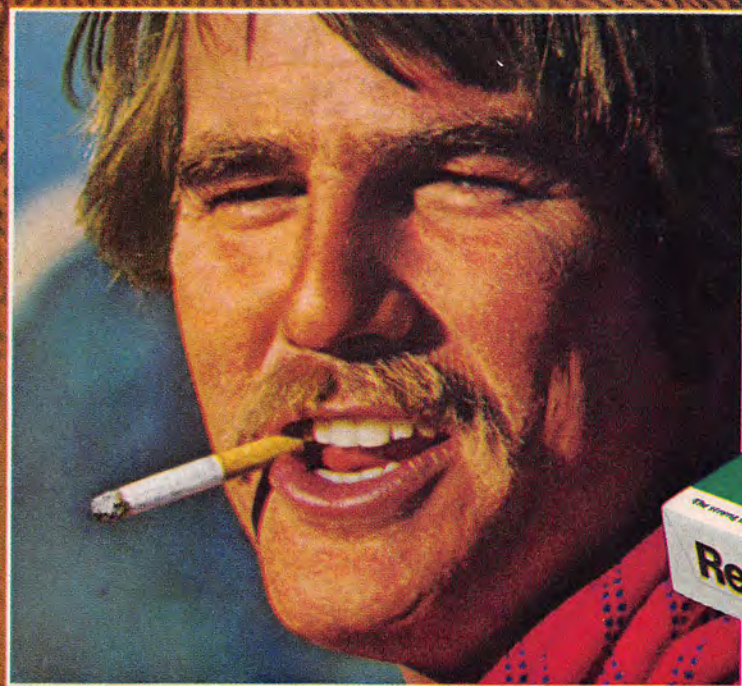
His bogey there put him two over par as he stood on the 17th tee. "Bean," he announced, "you gotta birdie the last two holes." Which is exactly what he did. But he is seldom satisfied with his score or his game. "He's one of the few guys I know who gets mad at good shots," says Bill Kratzert, who earned \$183,683 last year without winning a tournament. "He can

"To win more than anyone you got to work more," says Bean, whose career earnings in his first three years on the PGA Tour top any other golfer.



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Andy Bean

hit it ten feet from the cup, but in his mind it should be three feet."

At the David Crystal showroom, Andy Bean reaped one of the benefits of his drive for perfection—a supply of shirts, slacks and sweaters to wear on the tour. In our sometimes upside-down world, the more money a touring pro earns, the less he has to lay out for clothes and equipment.

"I always wore these shirts with the little alligator," he said as Debbie picked out some sport clothes for herself. "Even before I got 'em free."

When he turned pro in the fall of 1975, he also had offers of new clubs from several equipment manufacturers, but he stayed with the Wilson clubs he was using.

"I can't understand why some guys switch equipment just for a few bucks," he said. "They've probably been playing with the same set of clubs for years, but for \$500 they'll change to another brand. That doesn't make sense to me. You can make that \$500 a lot easier with clubs you're comfortable with."

Soon the good ol' boy who grew up on Jekyll Island was downstairs in the midst of Manhattan's garment center as the offices emptied at five o'clock. Thirsty in the sticky heat, he stopped at a soft-drink and snack counter. "Two apple juice, a Coke and a hot dog," he said.

When his order arrived, the PGA Tour's leading money-winner flipped through the bills in his money clip and said, "Oh, no! Can you change a \$100 bill?"

"No," the counterman said. "See the boss inside."

At the cash register at the rear of the store, the boss looked up as the big man handed him a \$100 bill. "Hey," the boss said, "you Andy Bean the golfer?"

"That's right," Bean said. "You must watch that TV pretty close."

"Not that close," the boss said, "but I know you."

Andy Bean smiled. He was flattered to be recognized in the middle of the garment center. But minutes later, as he plodded through the midtown rush-hour traffic, he said, "If it takes more than 15 minutes to go across town—the town is too big for me."

"Is that," he was asked, "what it took you to go across Jekyll Island as a kid?"

"It took ten, 15 minutes to go the length of the island. Five to go across it."

He was born in Lafayette, Ga., near Atlanta, but when he was three, his father Tom moved the family to Jekyll Island to be a teaching pro. His father is now the pro at the Jekyll-Hyde course in Lakeland, Fla., not far from where Andy and Debbie live at the Grenelefe resort. Back

in 1945, his father entered an Atlanta tournament that had Sam Snead, Dutch Harrison and Harold "Jug" McSpaden in the field.

"I remember the total prize money was \$2,500—that's total," Tom Bean says. "I didn't even make the cut, so when Andy came along, I figured I'd raise a golfer who could make the cut. It's been a plan. It didn't just happen."

By the time Andy was 12, he had been playing golf for about eight years. But then he discovered other sports—football, baseball, hunting, fishing and surfing. He stopped playing golf. His father knew it would be a mistake to order him to play, so he used reverse psychology. He sold Andy's set of cut-down clubs.

"What for?" Andy wondered.

"You weren't using 'em," his father said. "Now you can't use 'em. They're gone."

Andy didn't play for a month.

"But then," his father says now, "I could see he was gettin' edgy to play. He asked his mother about it and she suggested he see me. I told him I'd get him a new

**"At my age, I've got
as good a chance
as anybody for the
grand slam"**

set of clubs, but only if he would work at his game. And he said, 'Yes, sir.' He hasn't done hardly anything but play golf since."

Tall and strong, Andy soon was a big hitter; now big enough to be an NFL tight end, he's one of the PGA Tour's longest drivers. Annoyed once that he was often being outdriven by the diminutive Chi Chi Rodriguez, he challenged the little Puerto Rican to a one-on-one driving contest.

"I hit mine 290 yards," Chi Chi recalls, "and Andy hit his 360 yards."

But perhaps more than most youngsters, Bean worked on his putting touch. "Our putting green at Jekyll Island had a brick walk going through the middle—five holes on one side, four on the other," he says. "I used to get around there in 15, 16 putts, including the one across the brick walk. I think I needed only 13 once. I'd stay out there four, five hours at a stretch sometimes. I think that's the main reason my putting is as good as it is. Some people seem surprised that a big guy like myself has a good touch. But lots of big guys have a good touch—Andy North, George Archer."

In those years he often challenged his father to a putting contest. "I was known as a pretty good putter in my day," his father says. "I could always beat Andy—

then. I'd beat him and tell him to go practice some more. I think him and his mother thought I was too hard on him. But now they don't think I was too hard. Other people always wondered why I didn't make this big boy get a job when he was a teenager. But he had a job—learning to play golf."

Tom Bean occasionally visits his son on the tour. He even caddied for Andy in the British Open last year at the Old Course in St. Andrews, the Scottish shrine of golf.

"He took me over there with him, but I just carried the bag. I didn't pick the clubs for him," his father says. "I know his swing but he knows how he hits certain clubs."

Andy Bean was never in contention in his first British Open; those Scottish and English courses require a run-up shot to the hard greens rather than his high, backspin wedge shots. Those courses also require a sense of history. In the press tent early that week, Andy talked about how he mis-hit his tee shot on the first hole.

"I put it in the ditch," he said.

The Scots almost fainted. To them, it's not a "ditch" meandering across the first fairway, it's the famous Swilcan Burn—burn being Scottish for brook.

"Burn, Burn," his father told him later. "It's a burn over here, not a ditch."

Andy Bean knows that now. He also knows that he wants to be the best, up there with Nicklaus and Watson and Trevino and Player and Palmer. He showed that those big names don't intimidate him in a practice round for the 1977 Memorial tournament at Muirfield Village, outside Columbus, O., where Nicklaus was the host. That year Nicklaus arranged to play a practice round with Palmer and Player in an advertised reunion of the "Big Three," as they once were known. Bean, meanwhile, had set up a practice round with Bill Kratzert, Chi Chi Rodriguez and Fuzzy Zoeller, but at the appointed hour he couldn't find his three pals.

"They teed off already," Bean was told. "They're out on the course."

Unaware of the Big Three grouping, Bean, who had only one tour victory at the time, called to Nicklaus on the first tee, asking if he could join them. Nicklaus welcomed him. It wasn't until later that Bean discovered he had unwittingly barged in on the Big Three attraction. Embarrassed, he apologized to Nicklaus, who assured him there was nothing to apologize for. He also discovered later that Kratzert, Rodriguez and Zoeller had been on the practice tee, waiting for him.

"Too big for us now, huh?" Kratzert joked later. "I guess you think you're part of a Big Four now, huh?" It was a joke then, but it's not a joke now.

As soon as he develops a little more patience, Andy Bean will be part of golf's Big Four, or Big Three, or Big Two. Or maybe even Big One. ■

Kelly Tripucka: “He Likes It Rugged”

Having learned aggressiveness early from his older brothers, Tripucka had no trouble achieving instant stardom at Notre Dame. “I don’t play dirty,” he says, “but I rough it up”

By MARK RIBOWSKY

Don’t let anybody kid you; basketball is a contact sport,” young Kelly Tripucka is saying. We are sitting over dinner at the Morris Inn on the Notre Dame campus. Kelly, a ruggedly spectacular sophomore forward, towers above his plate like a lion over a fresh carcass. He has already eaten a shrimp cocktail, a fruit cup, a pyramid of rolls, a huge steak, and now, with a shy grin, he is calling for the dessert menu. “I think one of the reasons I fit in so well and so quickly last season was that, well, too many freshmen aren’t ready for the sort of contact and tough team play that they’re going to get in college. Most high schools just play basic run-and-gun.”

Tripucka certainly fit in quickly as a freshman in 1977-78. He didn’t turn 19 until the season was two-thirds done, yet he helped carry the Fighting Irish basketball team to the semifinals of the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament for the first time in the school’s history. What particularly impressed everyone was Tripucka’s ability to step right onto a big-time college court and muscle his way under the boards to get the easy shot or the tough rebound against taller, older, more experienced players. It is a tribute to Tripucka’s maturity that he can discuss his play frankly. “I’ll go to the hoop with anybody,” he says. “That’s the way I was brought up—shoot and be aggressive. I enjoy playing that way. I don’t play dirty, but I rough it up in there. I feel it helps me to get a few extra shots inside. Also, it’s not my game to shy away, to freeze on the last basket. If a shot comes up where I have to be in the so-called hero’s spot, well, okay, I stick my nose in there, dive for loose balls, get a few cuts and bruises. I don’t think about being intimidated, not by anybody.”

The previous night I had watched an aggressive, young Notre Dame team rough it up against overmatched Northwestern. At 6 feet 7 and 215 pounds, Tripucka was by no means the biggest man on the floor, but he was certainly one of

the most ornery. Although visiting Northwestern won the opening tap, he quickly stole the ball, drove the baseline and hit a short jumper for the game’s first score. Moments later, mixing it up under the boards, Tripucka was knocked down—and charged with the foul. He wiped the blood off his mouth, bounced up, dived back into the melee—and promptly drew another foul. Two minutes, two fouls, but it didn’t slow him down a whit.

In the early going, Notre Dame needed all the muscle it could get; the Irish were playing sloppy ball. Twice Tripucka muscled his way inside, getting both the field goal and the foul. Then, midway through the first half, Tripucka missed an outside jumper, crashed inside for the rebound and grabbed it, leveling a big Northwestern forward in the process. *Thweeeet* went the whistle, and Tripucka sat down with his third foul.

Despite Tripucka’s absence, the Irish took a 48-29 lead at halftime.

In the second half, Tripucka raced upcourt on a fast break, took a pass and laid the ball in from the left side. Out for a breather, he became the team’s No. 1 holler guy, moving around and shouting constantly. Back on the floor, he settled down Rich Branning after the Irish floor leader had missed his third foul shot of the night. Dribble it a couple of times before you put it up, Tripucka pantomimed. Soon he went up for a rebound against Northwestern’s 7-foot center, Brian Jung, and—crack!—they both crashed to the floor. Tripucka jumped to his feet, sped upcourt, caught a pass from Branning, drove the baseline and hit a jump shot. Eventually Tripucka left the game with 15 points and five rebounds, and the Irish subs closed out a 101-57 victory, Notre Dame’s second 100-plus effort in its first three games. Though North-

“When you need someone who knows where to go for the ball, Kelly’s the man,” says Irish coach Digger Phelps.



Kelly Tripucka

western was not a tough test, Notre Dame clearly had the power to reach the NCAA final round again this season, quite possibly for a rematch of its furious battle with Duke in the 1978 semifinals.

If that game takes place in March, you can bet your last Polish shamrocks that the family Tripucka will be there in force. Kelly is the son of Frank Tripucka, who quarterbacked the 1948 Notre Dame football team to a No. 2 national ranking, and the brother of a half-dozen other Tripuckas, five boys and a girl, all of them superior athletes. They are Tracy, all-time leading scorer in basketball at Lafayette College, who spent part of last season as interim head-coach at Fordham and is now an assistant coach at Utah; Todd, who came close to equaling Tracy's record at Lafayette; Mark, the only one to follow in his father's cleat-marks, who played quarterback at the University of Massachusetts; sister Heather (Tracy's twin), who once scored 57 points in an intramural basketball game at St. Mary's College; T.K. (Timothy Kimball), a senior who plays basketball for Fordham; and Chris, a hotshot sophomore forward at West Essex High School in New Jersey.

Indeed, the Tripucka genes—combined with years of never-give-an-inch athletic warfare at home—helped make Kelly, once just a tagalong behind his older brothers, not only the best of the Tripucka breed but the toughest, skin-on-the-floor forward in the college game today. He also has all the subtle basketball skills, the shooting touch included. In his first three games in 1977, he scored 16, 18 and 19 points. He was named most valuable player in the nationally televised game against Marquette that clinched an NCAA bid for the Irish. He was later named MVP on the All-Midwest Regional team in the opening rounds of the NCAA tournament, largely on the strength of his 18-point, 11-rebound performance that crushed favored DePaul. And he was, to repeat, only a freshman.

Notre Dame coach Digger Phelps was delighted with Kelly's instant aggression. "When it comes time to play hard-nosed basketball," Phelps says, "when you need someone who knows where to go for the ball and how to get it to the basket, Kelly's the man. He's a very strong athlete, and he never backs down from a challenge. He was forced into that by his brothers, and he likes that rugged style of play. He's that ideal combination, an aggressive, quality player."

And a popular one. Tripucka also inherited the good-natured attitude that has made his father one of the most successful beer distributors in northern New Jersey. That attitude was apparent in young

Kelly even after the 90-86 loss to Duke at the end of Notre Dame's finest season ever (23-8). The athletic office in South Bend was pretty quiet that harsh March afternoon—until Kelly Tripucka arrived. He breezed into sports information director Roger Valdiserri's office in high spirits—friendly, firm handshake, big rabbit-toothed smile. He was wearing a black-and-green checked wool coat and looked immense, like a fully developed tight end. He settled back on the sofa and laughed at the reminder that teammate Duck Williams had said he was looking for Kelly to pass to in those final, excruciating seconds when the Irish almost caught Duke.

"That's right," Kelly said. "I was wide open on the bench. Coach had our pressing defense on the floor, which means four guards. Anyway, I was hollering for someone to call a timeout, to get us off the floor and get a play set. But there was too much noise and excitement to be heard. Duke is a great team, but we beat ourselves. We just weren't poised in the first half."

He was asked about his low-scoring performance (six points) in that first half, if he thought he had been pressing too hard. "No, not at all," he said. "I felt I had the shots; I was getting inside, like I'm supposed to. But for one thing, the rim was shaky. The ball was going in, jiggling around and popping out. I hate to gripe, but I'll tell you, too, that my brother and I went over to the Chase

"I stick my nose in there, dive for loose balls, get a few cuts and bruises," says sophomore Tripucka.



Plaza after the game, and several coaches were around. They all said it was the worst officiating in the final four games they had ever seen."

Shaky rims. Bad calls. What may sound like the whiny rationalizations of callow youth are in truth the rational observations of a well-honed young mind. In point of fact, *Duke* had trouble with the same dancing basket in the second half, and the refs *did* let the game get away from them. Remember, too, that Kelly comes from one of the most competitive athletic families in the land; fighters do not alibi.

The Tripuckas grew up in Bloomfield Township, N.J., where Kelly was "The Kid" in a large, aggressive family. He remembers his hard-learned playground lessons fondly. "I guess you could call mine a great childhood. Wish I had films of it." The films would show an 11-year-old kid tagging along to be the fifth "man" on an all-Tripucka team at nearby Brookside Park. Todd remembers that, "We gave everyone a good battle." But the best wars, Tracy remembers, "were the ones in the backyard, playing two-on-two and three-on-three." Says Kelly: "I took a lot of abuse playing against that kind of competition. Lotta bumps and bruises and getting yelled at, being told that I stunk. That was hard to take, sure, and I cried a lot. But it helps you mature mentally. Consequently, I adjusted very fast in high school."

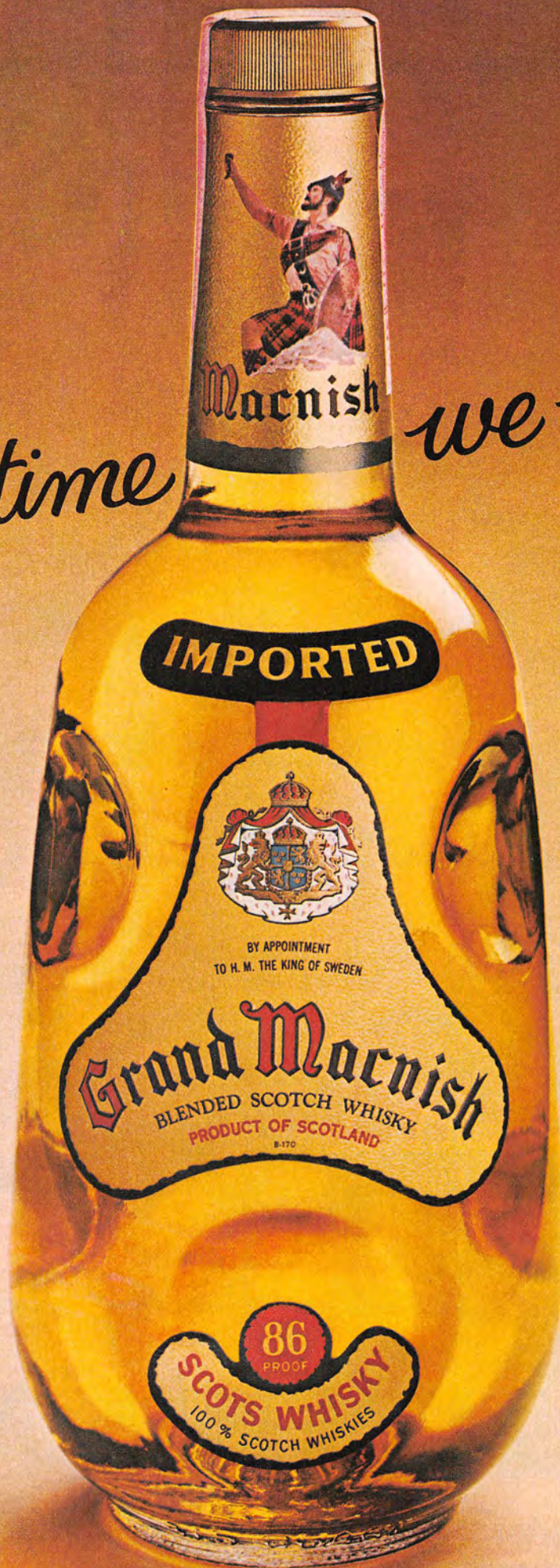
Later, sitting in his den and surrounded by Frank Tripucka recalls, "They tried like mad to get Kelly interested in football, but he just didn't take to it. So I sat him down for a fireside chat and said, 'You're not going to sit around all fall just waiting for basketball to start. Go find something.' So he went out for soccer and became all-state." Kelly also found something to do in the spring; he still owns the high school's records for the discus and javelin throws and the high jump.

But as much as he liked soccer and track, they were basically warmups for basketball. He first starred in his favorite sport while in junior high school in a tough, mostly black, summer league in East Orange.

"This was a brand new outdoor league," Kelly recalls enthusiastically, "and I hadn't even begun my sophomore year. They asked my brother T.K. to play and said I'd get to come along in a couple of years. But in the first two games they lost by a total of 40 points. That's when I got asked to play."

"Well, I drove down to East Orange and was introduced as T.K.'s little brother. I figured that at best I'd get in for a couple of minutes. But they put me in when the score was close late in the first half. Right away, I got a couple of rebounds and got the shots in. So when the second half started, I was going to the

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Kelly Tripucka

boards all out, getting the rebounds, making my shots. The fans went wild, seeing this young white kid racking up 20 points. They loved me; they really did. They thought I was a white black guy. I made a lot of great friends there."

After that came high school. Every college star's high-school statistics are impressive, but Tripucka's were ridiculous: 2,278 career points, 1,350 rebounds and twice first-team All-America. In the state finals of his senior year (which Bloomfield lost), the opposition presented a full-game, full-court press. So Kelly brought the ball upcourt himself—and hit 21 of 27 shots from the top of the key. Such pyrotechnics brought college recruiters in slaving herds. Frank Tripucka was eager for one of his boys to go to Notre Dame, and felt that Kelly "had the makeup and the temperament for the school." But Dad had learned a hard lesson on that score. "I thought Tracy would go to Notre Dame," he recalls, "but Johnny Dee—he was coaching at the time, an old classmate of mine—took us out to dinner in New York and made the mistake of saying, 'I'll take you out to Notre Dame because of your father.' Tracy got up and left the table and that was it for Notre Dame." So Frank made sure Digger Phelps didn't repeat the gaffe. "I said, 'Don't hound him,' and I was right. Tennessee did, and Maryland did, but Digger never even came to the house. All that business turned Kelly off."

Kelly Tripucka does not remember this trying time fondly. "If I had to go through it again, well, I just wouldn't go through it," he says. "I found myself ducking phone calls at night—I can't say no. I was averaging 12 calls a day from 12 different people. Finally I had my mother answering the phone because I just couldn't take it anymore. I did enjoy meeting Bill Foster and the other coaches at Duke, and got to be good friends with their ballplayers—swell bunch of guys. But as for the rest of it. . . ."

Kelly had never seen a game in South Bend, but his visit there as a high-school senior sold him. "The players were great," he says. "They cared about you, seriously wanted to know what you wanted out of a school. I really liked that. And the coaches didn't bug me too much—they treated me like a person, not an athlete. Of course, Notre Dame has a great tradition, but it really came down to getting along so well with the players."

Freshman Tripucka began his varsity career as the sixth man—and quickly. In the season opener against the University of Mississippi, he sat on the bench about four minutes before Phelps sent him in. Three seconds later, Tripucka grabbed a rebound and turned it into a three-point

play—on a jump shot and a free throw. "Boy, I was eager, and that home crowd really juices you up," he says. "I got into the flow, got my shots up and scored 16 points."

After that, he played more and became an established starter by midseason.

"Digger's style of offense," Tripucka explains, "is ideal for me—passing game, five-man rotation, set the pick, keep the ball moving, look for the open man. When you get the shooting touch, that offense really works for you. Defense—that's the biggest adjustment. In high school you can sometimes take it easy getting back downcourt. But here, you can't ever let down."

Tripucka's self-appraisal closely paralleled a rival coach's scouting report on Kelly: "Excellent inside moves. Excellent offensive rebounder. He's got an instinct for where the rebound is coming off. Superior set of hands, something that's underrated in a lot of ballplayers. When he grabs the ball, it's his. His weaknesses are defensive. He hasn't played a lot of team defense and real quick for-

**"No holdbacks.
No regrets. That's
my personality,"
says Tripucka**

wards could give him trouble." That report was rendered by one Tracy Tripucka, before his Fordham team played Notre Dame in Madison Square Garden in February, 1978—Kelly's 19th birthday. Naturally, his father and mother were there, determinedly neutral. "That was a lot of fun," Kelly says, "with Tracy coaching and T.K. playing. He and I started ribbing each other during warm-ups, and kept it up all through the game. I loved blocking one of his shots. Another time, scrambling for a loose ball, T.K. and I hit the floor together and came up laughing. He had a good game, and I hit seven in a row."

Fordham, of course, was no match for Notre Dame, but defending NCAA champion Marquette was quite something else. Notre Dame needed a victory to be invited to the NCAA tournament. While Phelps experimented with different five-man combinations, Tripucka played only five or six minutes—all scoreless—and Marquette took a 39-25 lead at halftime.

Tripucka started the second half and, he recalls, "started going to the boards and moving around a lot." He scored 15 points and had seven rebounds in the second half; Notre Dame won 65-59.

In the NCAA tournament, the Irish crushed favored Houston 100-77 and then

beat Utah 69-56. Next came DePaul, which earlier had defeated the Irish at South Bend—which is akin to beating the Soviet Army hockey team in Minsk. This time DePaul led 44-41 in the second half when Tripucka missed a shot inside but snared his own rebound and scored on a fallaway jumper. Moments later, Notre Dame changed its strategy against DePaul's two-three zone defense.

"We were in a guard-cutoff offense," Tripucka explains, "with me going corner to corner. Well, we just weren't doing enough, especially against Dave Corzine, DePaul's 6-11 center. So we thought it might open up if [teammate] Bruce Flowers went corner to corner and I went inside. That forced Corzine to make a decision on who to cover, and that left a seam in the high post. Corzine would get caught down low guarding Flowers while I was getting the ball at the high post with an open lane to the basket. Corzine just wasn't fast enough to pick me up."

Sure enough, Tripucka hit a 12-footer to put the Irish ahead 47-46. NBC-TV analyst Al McGuire shook his head in wonder and said, "He's just a frosh and he's taking the game away by himself."

So he did. A wrongside layup from the left, an incredible 25-foot bank shot from the right, and Notre Dame began to break the game open. Finally, on a three-on-one fast break with four minutes left in the game, Tripucka took the ball to the basket and made it 69-56. Soon DePaul began taking out its starters, and Tripucka slapped each one on the rump and congratulated him.

In the lockerroom afterward, Tripucka was ebullient. "Maybe I'm nuts," he said with a laugh. "Some people think I am, but I get along with everybody. No holdbacks. No regrets. That's my personality, and it shows on the court. That's all right; people think all guys from Jersey are nuts anyway. People tend to see us as a bunch of tough guys who go out and do what we feel like with no regrets and nobody to push us around. I say, 'Fine.' I like New Jersey—and anyway—" he laughs again—"that's not such a bad reputation to have on a basketball court."

Off-court, Tripucka is quickly catching on to the modern media hustle. Last year he thought he'd major in American studies; this year he has decided on communications. Says Frank LaGrotta, sports announcer on Notre Dame's radio station: "Kelly is a natural. We got him on a radio show with a telephone question-and-answer format. Within three minutes he had taken over the show completely, and by the end of it he had five dates."

So Kelly Tripucka has a bright future: a certain shot at the pros, a likely television career after that. But he does have a more immediate goal: meeting Duke again in the NCAA tournament. "I want to play them again. And let me tell you, if we do, you're going to hear rafters ring." ■

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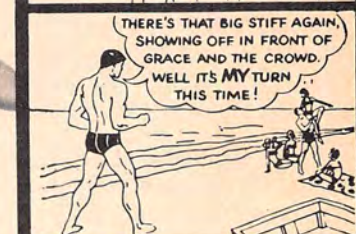


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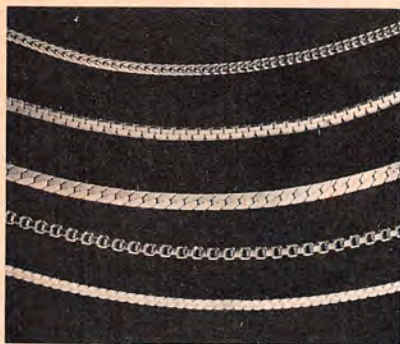
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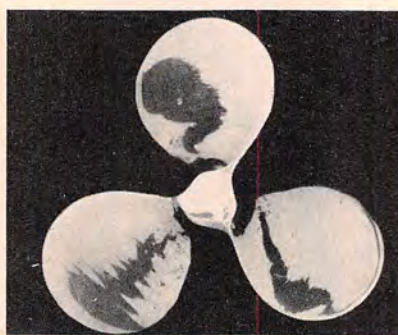
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Devil's Backbone Reef hides the world's strangest shipwreck... and a case of Canadian Club.



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The train lies off Eleuthera's northern tip, scattered on Devil's Backbone Reef. At least six wrecks are strewn here: a diver's paradise, we thought, and a perfect place to hide a case of C.C.

We headed for Romora Bay Club on Harbour Island. The club could provide us a launch and guides to explore the

reef. Nearby Dunmore Town could offer Bahamian entertainment, complete with Canadian Club. But no one could provide us with a reliable story of how or when the train had sunk on the reef.

Seek groupers, and bring muscles.

We combed Devil's Backbone till we found a devilish place to hide our Canadian Club.

To raise the C.C., you'll need scuba gear, guts and muscle: it weighs 200 pounds. Start where a "dinner boat" went down on Devil's Backbone. Follow a channel across the reef to an old Ward Line steamer wreck (try this only in bright sunlight or you'll lose your boat). Take a bearing from its bow. Not more than 200 yards along, where the reef slopes into deep water and a big Nassau grouper lives, we sunk the watertight case of Canadian Club.

May your seas for the search be as smooth as our whisky. Note: nonswimmers may discover their own Canadian Club adventure at bars or local package stores by just saying "C.C., please."



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